

三屋咲ゆう

Illustration: okiura

スカイアーティスト

09.
戦歌
日 愚





ブランシャール選手の苛烈な猛攻！
エンフィールド選手もそれを紙一重で見事に回避しています！

が、

英士郎、

お互い素手の勝負なんじゃなかつたの?」

「もちろんそうだとも。
ただ、困ったことにどうやらこの魔ビル、
あちこち罠が仕掛けられてるみたいでさ」



「クローディア！」



Chapter 1 – Recollection/Last Night

From when she became aware of things around her, Claudia thought, although vague, of walking the same path as her parents.

In fact, Claudia was a resourceful child worthy to be called prodigy; she possessed high intelligence and physical ability — and above all, while very young, she excelled at delicately reading surrounding people's subtleties, intuitively guess what they desired and what they hated, and was also good at the technique to control it through the mood, words and gestures.

Be it in terms of ability or even judging from her family status principle which remained deeply rooted to a part of the Europe's Integrated Enterprise Foundation, she was a talented enough person. And in terms of prospects, Claudia was supposed to become a top executive of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation and be added among the handful of humans moving/leading the world.

Only if she was not a <Genestella>, that is.

Such time would eventually come. The number of <Genestella>, in other words, the ratio of <Genestella> in the total population would surely increase, though slowly. In dozens of years later or hundreds of years later..... there was no mistaking that the time when the <Genestella> would free themselves from the minority would come.

But, it was still different now.

In this day and age, the <Genestella> were regarded to the bitter end as no more than heretics. No matter how much talented they were, no matter how many achievements they piled up, there did not exist a place where the

<Genestella> could get into the system's upper echelon.

Naturally, Claudia's parents, Isabella and Nicholas, knew it, and Claudia herself also understood it while she had not yet reached 10 years old. Even so, Claudia did not feel frustrated or disappointed.

She neither had any strong desires, nor earnestly sought something.

She only stood alone in a remote place far from craving and passion.

In other words, Claudia Enfield was such a child.

"Teyaah!"

Together with a voice filled with fighting spirit, a sharp sword slash drew an arc.

Shining golden hair lightly danced in the air, and on the ground, another blond hair waved, disheveled trying to chase it.

『A fierce attack of player Blanchard! But, player Enfield splendidly evades it by a hair's breadth! This fierce fighting is really worthy to be this <Rondo Versailles>'s final!』

There were many Martial Arts Tournaments belonging to the low-end category of the <Festa>, but the <Rondo>, which was held up in the western European countries, was a tournament known widely among them. The entry qualifications were limited to children under 13 years old, and the safety measures too were stricter compared to those of the <Festa>. The obligation of wearing a protector, the limitation of the use weapon (only luxes with power/output adjusted to the minimum level) and the complete prohibition of the use of ability through mana..... if one had to describe it, it would be the closest to call it a <Festa> made intended for children. It was

for that reason that the score system was brought in; one got a point when his attack hit his opponent's protector, something like competing for the amount of points.

Regarding the physical growth peculiar to the <Genestella>— a strong physique, strong muscles, the amount of prana and the like — individual differences were remarkable. Although generally they arrived at a constant level by the end of the secondary sex characteristic period, there was especially a striking disparity regarding the amount of prana, which meant instability on the side of defensive ability by the <Genestella> in their childhood period. So the safety measures were a necessity.

However, it was not for an ethical viewpoint; the aspect of not wanting the players to injure themselves at the evaluation stage was bigger.

Not only this <Rondo>, but also the other Martial Arts Tournament belonging to the low-end category of the <Festa> did not hold that big a value in the commercial meaning.

Moreover, it is more accurate to say that a tournament for children was a selection meeting for each academy of Asterisk to discover new talents.

(.....To be forwarded to a freak show, a certain level is required; so it's quite tough)

While Claudia muttered so in her heart, she evaded the sword slash of her opponent — Laetitia Blanchard, who won and advanced until this final at the age of 9 just like her, with steps as if dancing.

“Tch, moving around restlessly!”

Laetitia, becoming irritated, swung her thin sword type lux; but Claudia splendidly handled her fierce attacks with a small sword type lux she held with both hands.

“Fufufu..... looks like you have improved your skills again, Laetitia.”

“Kiiiiih! That composure of yours, I do not like it! Then, how about this.....!”

The point of her sword suddenly drew a perpendicular trajectory.

“!”

Laetitia’s thin sword approached Claudia’s chest from an unexpected angle. Claudia has crossed swords with Laetitia on countless occasions, but this was a sword line that she has never seen so far.

On Laetitia’s expression, a smile convinced of her victory appeared.

—But.

“Wha!?”

Claudia greatly turned her upper body away and evaded Laetitia’s blow with all her might.

And as she got up while twisting her body using the small sword in her right hand as support, she drove in sword blows consecutively on the protector of Laetitia’s leg, arm and chest.

Almost simultaneously, the sound announcing the end of the match echoed in the stage, and Claudia stored her lux while turning a soft smile to the stunned Laetitia.

“That last one was really dangerous. Too bad for you.”

“G-Gununuh.....!”

Though there was no exaggeration in her words, Laetitia’s face turned red and she bit her lips in vexation. Tears looked like they spilled over her eyes at any moment.

“T-Today, luck wasn’t just on my side! So, you shouldn’t get too cocky!”

“I see, luck, huh..... It may certainly be so. That said, including the practice match, I have seven wins with this; looks like Laetitia is a bit too unlucky.”

“Ngh.....! T-That’s.....”

“Besides, victory depends on luck in the first place. In other words, shouldn’t you think of including that luck’s factor from the beginning?”

“Aww.....”

Unable to retort, Laetitia was at a loss for words with an expression of being about to cry.

Claudia, who saw that, held out her right hand with a wry smile.

“.....But, the balance of the luck too might incline to your direction next time. At that time, I would like you to go easy on me.”

“__”

As Laetitia turned her back for a moment and briskly wiped her eyes, she immediately turned to face Claudia again and took her hand.

“T-That’s right.....! Properly praising one’s opponent is also a lady’s modesty..... Congratulations, Claudia. But, the next time for sure, I will absolutely, absooolutely win!”

Although slightly crooked, a smile appeared on the face of such Laetitia. The height of her pride, the strong will of trying to endure the humiliation and complicated feelings such as jealousy and envy towards Claudia exuded from that smile as she was unable to conceal them. But, an honest praise could certainly be felt in the root.

In fact, Claudia did not dislike such a part of Laetitia.

When Claudia and Laetitia shook each other’s hands, great cheers rose from

the audience all at once. Even if the commercial value of the <Rondo> was not that much, the degree of attention of the event itself was high. The audience seating was filled to the extent that there were also people standing watching the matches.

『This final where both girls confronted each other like last year! And the winner is, again like last year, player Claudia Enfield!』

While the voice of the excited live reporter resounded, Claudia smiled wryly and shrugged her shoulders.

“In the first place, you cannot freely display your ability here, so I also do not think that I have really won.”

Laetitia was a <Strega> and she could originally create shining wings and manipulate them. Although one form of offense and defense of that ability was still in development, even so there was no room of doubt that it was powerful. This <Rondo>, in which the use of ability was prohibited, was something like a handicap battle for Laetitia.

“I-I’m not so shameful as to complain about the rules at this late hour!”

But, Laetitia said so plainly.

Though it was not like she did not think that it was good to put the fault on luck, it seemed to be Laetitia’s dignity in her own way.

“Besides, even without being in a hurry, I would one day be able to fight against you at a more suitable place.”

“By that, do you mean in Asterisk?”

“Ara, of course you’ll go there as well, right?”

In a way as if to say ‘what are you saying now?’, Laetitia tilted her head to the side.

“That’s, right..... probably.”

Although she affirmed as such, Claudia’s answer was somewhat unclear.

This was because Claudia herself did not have a clear thought regarding such future.

There was no doubt that the majority of children participating in this <Rondo> were aiming for Asterisk. For better or worse, that Academy City of the Far East was the only place in the world where they could keep the meaning in being <Genestella> after all.

However, Claudia herself did not particularly have any fixation on Asterisk. Be it taking part in the <Rondo> like this, or also polishing her skills for fight, if she was compelled to say it, she just somehow did it like that without any particular reason — nothing more, nothing less.

Objectively judging her ability, there was no mistaking that she could distinguish herself well enough even in Asterisk. At the same time, Claudia also knew well that in the world, there were many people hiding talent surpassing hers.

And then, the wall stretching out there was probably not something so easy as to be able to cross it with just efforts and training.

Or if one had the motivation in overcoming it, he might find some meaning in going to Asterisk; but unfortunately, Claudia did not have even a fragment of pure foolishness to challenge such reality that could not be overturned.

“By the way, Laetitia. It has been bothering me for a little while now, but..... what is it with your tone?”

“Eh? Y-Yes, this is, um.....”

When changed the topic saying so, Laetitia averted her gaze with a bashful

face.

The Laetitia of before should have a slightly informal, child-like way of talking. However, although the current Laetitia's tone was polite, it somehow felt as if she was stretching herself.

"T-The truth is that the other day, I have gotten acquainted with a certain pair of brother and sister..... I was deeply impressed by their overflowing wisdom and noble character. So, well, I admire them and I want to get closer to them even if a little; and if possible I would also like to be like them....."

Laetitia said while squirming her body.



It looked like she was influenced by those brother and sister. Though it was not strange judging from Laetitia's simple character—

“Are you perhaps talking about the Fairclough House's siblings?”

“O-Oh, do you know them, too?”

Laetitia unexpectedly made her eyes twinkle.

“No. I am not acquainted with them, but I have often heard rumors about them.”

The fact that in the prestigious Fairclough House, there were siblings <Genestella> of the same generation Claudia and Laetitia — and with overwhelming sword skill at that was a famous topic. Though, they have not yet appeared in the front stage such as the <Rondo> even once. And despite that, the part of rumors about their skills spread out was probably not fake, but the real thing.

“Ah, then that sword line..... you learnt it from the Fairclough House's siblings, right?”

“W-Well, you could say that.....”

Laetitia scratched her cheek with an expression mixed with bashfulness and boastfulness.

“A-Anyway, those two said that they will eventually go to Asterisk; and like that, there's no doubt that they will enroll at Garrardsworth like me.”

Both the Fairclough House and the Blanchard House accounted for one of the factions in the Integrated Enterprise Foundation EP which was the parent organization of St. Garrardsworth Academy.

“You will go to Seidoukan, right? I am looking forward to meeting you in Asterisk.”

Laetitia said so and fearlessly laughed, seeming completely convinced that Claudia would go to Asterisk.

“Fufufu..... That’s right.”

However, as expected Claudia stopped at just returning a vague smile.

It might become like that, or maybe not.

For Claudia, either way did not make much of a difference.

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“If possible, I want to be next to Ayato forever.”

Inside the setting sun, Saya bashfully said so.

On the other hand, Ayato standing before her only stood stock still in blank amazement as is.

“It’s fine. You can give me your reply anytime. Just..... I only wanted to tell you that.”

As Saya left only these words, she left at a quick pace towards the girl’s dorm.

Her pace gradually quickened, and when she reached a place where Ayato’s eyes could no longer see her before long, she suddenly strayed to the side and hid behind a tree

Saya, who leaned on that tree’s trunk, joined both her hands, held them on her chest and greatly exhaled.

That figure of her tightly closing her eyes with a flushed face was quite fresh.

It looked like the confession just now was a big resolution even for Saya.

“—Ooh, Sasamiya is unexpectedly a maiden, too.”

While steeling a glance at her figure from a far treetop, Eishiro shook his shoulders and loosened his cheeks. Of course, voice could not be heard at this distance. He read the lips.

“However, hasn’t this become quite interesting? Even Amagiri made an absentminded face like an idiot.”

When he returned his gaze to Ayato, the latter did not seem to have moved yet from where he was probably because he was quite surprised.

The place where Eishiro lurked was a corner of the grove of trees that colored the Seidoukan Academy in green. Although it was the autumn, the time was early for leaves changing color, so the leaves which hid Eishiro’s body were still bright green.

“Haa..... Still, Sasamiya too saying that it’s fine for him to give a reply anytime, that won’t do! Ah geez, that’s irritating!”

Eishiro grumbled as he said so.

Saya and Ayato, neither of them seeming used to this sort of things, honestly there was no more irritating than this.

However, there was no mistaking that with this, a stone was thrown in the relationship of the women group surrounding Ayato.

“Well, in any case, I’ll have to report it to the Prez, I guess. And if I get to see even one of her surprised faces with this, it’ll mean there is still cute part in her, but.....”

Saying up to there, Eishiro shook his head while saying “no, no way”.

The figure of that Claudia being shaken by this much, he could not even imagine it.

“I guess it’d be good as a material for the newspaper club, the club president doesn’t like this sort of story that much. And besides, it looks like it’ll bad if I don’t ask for the Prez’s opinion.”

When he said so, at the time when he extended his hand to his pocket as he was going take out the portable terminal to contact Claudia.

“—Good grief, using the technique to look into distance for voyeurism, huh. When I thought that you’ve grown up a little, I see that you haven’t changed at all, Kageshiro.”

Suddenly, a hoarse, low voice resounded from behind.

“!”

As Eishiro promptly turned around and jumped down to the ground, he reflexively set up a dagger type lux with a backhand grip — but, multiple figures of people, who appeared as if oozing from the shadows of trees, soundlessly surrounded Eishiro. Full black attires covered their bodies entirely other than their eyes and, let alone their ages, even their sexes could not be distinguished.

However, Eishiro was familiar with these people — and above all the hoarse voice of earlier only too well.

“.....If it isn’t Father. I didn’t think you’ll possibly come here..... seems like you’re looking healthy.”

Even while having sweet on his forehead, Eishiro returned a sarcastic smile to the shadow up in a tree.

He had the same attire as the figures of people surrounding Eishiro, but

unlike the others, his head was not covered. He was of a medium build, his deeply wrinkled face was that of a man approaching old age and his hair combed down and his thick eyebrows were already pure white.

“*sigh*, don’t speak of compliment you don’t really mean.”

When the elderly — Yabuki Bujinsai, Eishiro’s father, said with an amazed face, he sat cross-legged on a branch and leaked an unnatural sigh.

“But, I’ve heard it you know? That you’re wandering around here and there as usual. How deplorable.”

“Well, I wonder what you’re talking about.”

Eishiro set up his lux and frivolously answered while shrewdly wandering his gaze in the surroundings.

“Don’t play dumb. Despite being enlisted in the Shadow Star, you choose your jobs and moreover you seem to have connections with people of another place.”

“No no, that’s just a false accusation, Father. Well, I have many acquaintances here and there though. And all of them are for work. There’s nothing better than being well known in this world[1], right?”

“So a greenhorn like you now talks impudently about work, huh. Really, how pathetic. Even though it’s precisely because we by no means serve two masters that we were able to maintain our bloodline so far.”

(.....It’s precisely because I don’t like it that I left the Village, you know?)

While revealing a flattering smile to Bujinsai looking down on him while resting his chin on his hand, Eishiro cursed as such inwardly.

Eishiro’s Clan, which was anciently called YabukiShu[2] or Night running ninja army (End range ninja army)[3], was a so-called Shinobi’s blood clan.

They received the influence of the Ulm mana dite handed down in the Village from long before the <Ember Tears> occurred and preserved their lineage which produced humans with ability surpassing that of ordinary people. In Japan, among the groups which formed such unique blood clans, only the Yabuki and Umenokouji remained at present.

“Now, now, you didn’t expressly come until here to lecture me, right? Is it a request to the extent that Father himself has to take action?”

While sounding out the surroundings’ presence, Eishiro gradually retreated.

The shadows of people surrounding Eishiro were probably the elites of the “First Shadows (Kinoe)[4]” placed at the top even in the clan. They were five. Furthermore, he also understood that there was the presence of a little less than ten people nearby.

“I’m about to go asking about it now.”

A request to the Clan’s head was always directly carried out orally. That was the custom.

“Does this mean that this grand unit formation is the designation of the other party?”

“Well, you could say that.”

At this point of time, the Clan exclusively undertook requests from the Integrated Enterprise Foundation Galaxy — more exactly, its upper echelon and was currently called with the stylish name of “Yabuki Clan (Knight Emmitt)”. It was so to speak in a position similar to the Shadow Star, but the Shadow Star, which was limited to activities only in Asterisk, was composed mostly of students. The Yabuki Clan was entrusted with Galaxy’s overall work behind the scenes and it could be said that position wise, it was roughly upwardly compatible with the Shadow Star (of course, there also existed

tasks that only the Shadow Star, which used the students' position, could do).

Though, this kind of organization that the Integrated Enterprise Foundation employed was not only the Yabuki Clan. There also existed Special Forces under the direct control of the military authorities that Galaxy was proud of; and such organizations should have been secretly continuing fierce secret feud against the organizations of the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations even now.

But, there was mistaking that Galaxy upper echelon valued the Yabuki Clan quite highly.

“Once we accept a work, we won’t let at all personal feelings get in our way. That’s why, before beginning our work, we came here like this to ascertain your side.”

“.....”

With only that, Eishiro realized the contents of the work that Bujinsai would receive.

“I see, I see; so Galaxy has finally begun working seriously in order to dispose of the Prez, huh.”

“Well, we haven’t yet heard about the request’s contents.”

Although Bujinsai said so as he feigned ignorance, there was probably no mistaking it since he expressly moved the Yabuki Clan at this time.

“—But, it is assuming that was the case.”

Then, a light suddenly ran in Bujinsai’s eyes and a ferocious overpowering feeling similar to bloodlust attacked Eishiro. To the chill as if his heart was pierced by a gleaming sword, Eishiro instinctively took distance from

Bujinsai, forcibly breaking the encirclement of the Kinoe(s).

“Kuh!”

But, as if having anticipated it, the Kinoe(s) extended their arms, trying to hold down Eishiro.

Eishiro broke the posture of one of them by twining his right leg around him while dodging, and then went around behind him by jumping and twisted his neck. Moreover, at the same time as he jumped away from that Kinoe, he drove in a sharp kick to the back of the neck of another Kinoe who came from the right side.

However, the other Kinoe(s) did not mind it at all even when their comrades have been knocked down. When he was about to slash at another Kinoe with the dagger in his hand, Eishiro was pinned down as he was slammed onto the ground.

“Hou. So, you defeat three Kinoe(s) alone, huh. It looks like your Taijutsu has improved quite a bit.”

While stroking his chin, Bujinsai said so as he was impressed.

Then, the three Kinoe(s), who were lying down on the ground, got up as nothing happened and silently stood at Eishiro’s side.

It was not like they did not suffer any damage. They just did not mind it. With the ability of the Kinoe(s) that Eishiro knew of and moreover all the more if there were five, though it might take time, they would be able to subdue him with as many safer methods as they liked.

But, the Yabuki Clan would not do it. This was because they gave top priority in quickly and certainly achieving their purpose no matter what the situation.

And Eishiro hated such thinking of his clan from the bottom of his heart.

“Listen well, stupid son. I know that you’re quite fond of Seidoukan’s president. But, don’t do unnecessary things. This is a warning as a father.”

“.....Well, thanks for that.”

As he was pressed down on the ground with a power which might break his arm, Eishiro moved only his face and glared up at Bujinsai.

When he ran his gaze at the trees in the surroundings, he was able to confirm that talismans with complex symbols drawn on them were stuck on the trees. It was a barrier to ward off people.

(Looks like I can’t expect for water break either, huh..... How careful of them.)[5]

Eishiro relaxed his body as he gave up. Further resistance was futile.

“I may look like this, but I highly value your talent as such. It’ll be a bit regrettable to lose you in such a place. Do you understand me?”

“As such, huh.”

Bujinsai said that, but Eishiro knew all too well that if he were to do something which got in the way of this mission, Bujinsai would cut off his neck without hesitation.

“So, your answer?”

“Haa.....”

Seeing the light running in Bujinsai’s eyes once again, Eishiro breathed out deeply.

“I’m certainly quite fond of the Prez. But, I value my life even more after all.”

“That’s a good mental attitude.”

At that moment, the power pinning down Eishiro suddenly disappeared.

When Eishiro stood up and tapped his clothes so as to dust them off, the figures of the Kinoe(s) and Bujinsai were nowhere to be seen.

The evening sun has already almost set and a forlorn dusk was covering the grove of trees.

“.....Tch.”

As Eishiro clicked his tongue as to spit out his irritation within that very dim light, he took out his portable terminal after having hesitated for a while.

“However, I’ll keep at least my sense of duty/honor, Father.”

When Eishiro muttered so to himself, he set his portable terminal to voice communication and called Claudia’s number.

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“.....Phew.”

Ayato, who returned from the bath while wiping his wet hair, sat down on the bed and unintentionally sighed.

What was inside his head was — Saya’s confession.

Ayato liked Saya as well and he also knew that Saya harbored good will towards him. But, he thought that it was only something extending to a family-like relationship and not something beyond that.

“.....No, I might have wanted to think only like that.”

He muttered so while lying on the bed face up.

Eishiro was not in the room — because now there was no class during the period of the <Festa>, it might be said that it was as usual — so it was just

the right time for Ayato to put his thoughts together.

They spend time always together almost every day when they were children; and even after they reunited like this, Saya has not changed at all.

Ayato was glad about it.

Frankly speaking, if he was asked a reply at that place, Ayato would have been at loss for an answer.

Currently, Ayato had a wish which he must have by all means granted.

That is, to have his big sister — Haruka, who continue sleeping in sickroom in a hospital, wake up.

That was what occupied the most important part of Ayato's heart/mind, and if Saya's feelings were serious, then all the more reason that he could not give her a reply in his actual state.

Rather, precisely because Saya also knew about it, she said that he could give a reply anytime.

"Well, I guess I can only take her upon her words for now....."

After putting everything in order, he should face her and properly give a reply.

For that reason, he must first think about winning their next match now.

".....All right!"

As Ayato fired himself up by slapping his cheeks, he received a call from his portable terminal that he threw out on the bed.

"Huh? Who might it be at this time.....?"

It was a period of time you could say that it was already midnight.

When he opened a space window, projected there was Claudia.

『Good evening, Ayato. Sorry to call you at this late hour, but may I have a little of your time?』

“Yes, I don’t mind it, but..... is it an urgent matter?”

Tomorrow in the morning, a strategy meeting with all the members of Team Enfield gathered was scheduled. Unless it was a very urgent business, there should be no problem if she were to report it at that time.

『Yes, it’s a very pressing matter.』

Claudia had an unusually serious expression without her usual smile.

“.....I got it. So, what is it?”

『Yes, in fact — is it true that Ayato was confessed to by Sasamiya-san?』

“Bufuh!?”

To these words which came flying from a direction he did not expect, Ayato unintentionally blew out.

“W-Wait a minute! How do you know that.....?!”

『Well, I am the student council president after all.』

“That can’t be considered a reason, right!?”

No matter how well-informed Claudia was, as expected she was too quick-eared.

『Leaving aside such minor details, I am extremely concerned about what kind of reply you gave.』

“.....I don’t think I’ve the obligation to answer you though.”

He declined so as it was a private matter after all.

『Yes, I think that you are quite right. But..... we are currently in the middle of <Gryps> that is a team battle, right? If a problem were to occur in our teamwork, it would be a cause for concern after all.』

“Uh.....”

After he was told so, it was difficult to rebut.

『As the team's representative, I should tentatively ask.』

“.....That's just an expedient, right?”

Though Ayato lightly glared at Claudia, it was no use hiding it now as she actually knew so far.

“I haven't replied yet. Saya told me that I can reply anytime. So — I think that it'll be after all of this is over.”

『Is that, so.....』

Then, unexpectedly Claudia only nodded calmly and said nothing further.

『.....Sasamiya-san, is really amazing, eh.』

Instead, she uttered so as if speaking to herself.

“Claudia.....?”

Suddenly, Ayato felt a sense of incongruity at such Claudia.

He could not put it into clear words, but it was a sense of incongruity as if recalling uneasiness.

『I understand, Ayato. Thank you for having answered honestly.』

However, before he could voice it out, Claudia said so with her usual smile

and finished the talk.

『Well then — see you tomorrow.』

“Ah, yes. See you then.”

The space window black out and silence returned in the room.

“.....Well, I guess I should just ask about it tomorrow.”

Although the strange uneasiness continued to bother him, there was no use thinking further about it now.

As he casually turned his gaze to the outside of the window, the sky, which was so fairly fine until the evening, was covered with clouds and neither the stars nor the moon could be seen at all.

“Which reminds me, it was forecasted that it would rain tomorrow.....”

While hoping that it would not be very strong, Ayato calmly closed the curtain.

Translator and references notes

[1]meaning world of espionage, information gathering and such, I think

[2]矢葺衆(やぶきしゅう) – word play: 矢葺衆 is Yabuki is certain, but I'm not sure what しゅう is referring to, there is too much word that could combine with it, such as lord or province by dragon1412

[3]夜奔忍軍(やばしりにんぐん) – Again, word play, やばしりにんぐん is actually refer to the archery range, which come in line with arrows references above, but I can't really translate it well into English by

dragon1412

[4]I'll use the word 'Kinoe' from hereafter

[5]水入り is refer to the break between martial art matches for well, water intake, hence 水入り, nowadays, it's also could be used to refer as when people relax in a middle of a work, in this case, he was hoping for a gap to open or the people to loosen by dragon1412

Chapter 2 – Recollection II/Dawn

“—That’s right, Claudia. Shall we go watch the next *<Lindvolus>*?”

A while after Claudia won the *<Rondo>*, Nicholas suddenly brought up the topic during breakfast.

“The *<Lindvolus>*, is it?”

When her father spoke those words while the waitress was pouring tea for him, Claudia paused from eating the apple compote and turned her gaze to him.

The Gothic Revival style mansion, which had been dismantled then rebuilt by Tee Burton, had furniture and furnishings that all conformed with antiques of Nicholas’ preferences, as well as fitting tableware and stainless pure white tablecloths. Nicholas preferred these, as combined with his own manners, it helped him recall the old days.

“I don’t particularly mind it, but..... then again it’s quite sudden.”

“I was invited. Therefore, I thought that since it’s a rare occasion, then you could come as well.”

Then in contrast with Nicholas, the utilitarian^[1] Isabella revealed a calm and gentle smile and said.

“Oh, that’s rare.”

As far as Claudia remembered at least, they had gone out as a family only one or two times.

Although, if one were to say it, you might also say that the whole family

gathering like this during breakfast was rare. Nicholas was still better; but when it came to Isabella, one could count the number of times she was present during breakfast in one year.

“In the next year, I will become busy for a while and considering my position, I will not be able to move that much freely. Being invited to the <Festa> will also prove to be difficult as well.”

Isabella was already almost assured a seat of a top executive of Galaxy. Certainly in that case, she would have less and less time to spare to trivial things.

“Besides, it will not be a bad thing for you to actually feel the atmosphere of Asterisk, will it?”

“Well, that’s right.....”

I see. It seemed to be due to his parental affection that he was attempting to illuminate a path for his hesitant daughter. In that case, she could not flatly decline it.

“It isn’t really like I’m telling you to advance to Asterisk. You should only use it as a reference. You’re free to live however you want after all.”

Though Nicholas’ words were somewhat pushy, Claudia was well aware that he said them because he thought for her sake.

Although Isabelle could not read until his real intention, it would rather only become a nuisance if she were to take a child along to enjoy the <Festa>; so at least expressly taking useless trouble to do it seemed to be her way of thinking about Claudia.

In other words, both her father and mother loved Claudia as such.

And to balance with it, Claudia loved both of them, as well.

Therefore.

“—Thank you.”

Claudia said so with a smile.

As a matter of fact, it was not like Claudia was hesitant; she just had neither deep emotion nor strong attachment for the future where she herself would advance.

Among some fans, the <Lindvolus> was called the <Festa> among the <Festas>.

There were several reasons such as that it was the very first <Festa> held up or that it was a <Festa> that decided the general results of the season; but above all, it was simply because it was an individual battle tournament which decided the strongest student of his/her era.

The title of <Great One> that has existed before was the ultimate glory given to the individual who earned the most points in the season. However, as each academy developed strategies in the <Festa>, the trend, where a student participated only in the <Festa> that suits his aptitude, became strong. As a result, the student acquisition points just kept decreasing in the season credit, and its meaning[2] would fade. Moreover, because the contest for the title <Great One> often caused serious antagonism within the academy, it had been abolished approximately 20 years ago. This was also probably one of the factors that boosted the value of the <Lindvolus>.

“.....I see. As expected of a real<Festa>. It’s on a whole different level from the low-end category ones (i.e. <Rondo>).”

Claudia, who was watching the<Lindvolus> from a VIP room of the Sirius Dome, muttered so at the intensity of the fight unfolded under her eyes.

Even though it was still at the stage of the first round, the players coming out were all considerably skilled. Claudia had naturally watched the matches’ videos of the <Festa> before, but one could say that the impact of seeing it close like this was incomparable after all.

“Because players with high degree of attention are assigned in this Sirius Dome, the level here is higher than in other domes.”

“Hmm. Which reminds me, I heard that a promising student of Seidoukan will come out in the next match.”

Nicholas and Isabella, who were sitting on both sides of Claudia, as might be expected, looked used to it as they had already come many times to watch matches. That said, it did not mean that both of them were particularly interested in the <Festa>. As members of the Galaxy head office, this much was the minimum courtesy.

“Promising student?”

“It’s a student who entered the <Page One> in the most recent Official Ranking Battle and moreover, it seems that he obtained a quite powerful ogre lux just the other day.”

To Claudia’s question, Nicholas answered while reading data off the small space window that he opened.

“A powerful ogre lux, is it?”

Claudia was also informed about Asterisk’s circumstance to some extent.

That means that the use application of an ogre lux has probably been admitted for that student as he became a <Page one>.

“Yes, if I remember correctly, they said it is called <Pan-Dora>.”

Nicholas said so as he did not seem to hold that much interest in it.

“From what I heard, it seems to possess the ability of future foresight, but.....”

“That is again an exceptional ability, eh.”

If that was true, one would probably not lose unless there was a great ability difference.

“But accordingly, the price paid for it is large. Due to that, I heard that there hasn't yet been any wielder who has been able to properly use it. I wonder how it'll be with that promising student.....”

“.....I think that it'll probably be harsh. The works of that professor all have a quite strong peculiarity after all.”

“Eh?”

At the time when Claudia shifted her attention to Isabella's way of speaking, which got more like some prediction, the live reporter's announce echoed in the hall and the students entered the stage from the entrance gates.

The one, who has entered from the western gate, was, according to the data at hand, a student of Queen Veil. She seemed to be ranked, but to be frank, she did not appear to be a student who could aim for a high rank that much. On the other side, the young man, who has entered from the eastern gate, seemed to be the above-mentioned promising one — but one realized that an uneasy noise ran among the spectators who saw the young man's appearance.

“Oh my, just as I thought.”

Isabella put a hand on her cheek as though she was quite disappointed.

The young man’s state was clearly abnormal. His steps tottered and there was almost no vitality on his face projected in the space screen. His eyes were hollow and his cheeks were scrawny like a sick person’s. At a glance, one could realize that it was not a condition in which he could fight satisfactorily.

Even so, perhaps because he had only the will to fight, he activated the ogre lux that he had in his hand while slowly advancing. One could feel that the twin swords ogre lux — the eerie design that looked just like eyeballs emitted a somewhat ominous aura.

“!?”

At that moment, a shock as if being struck by lightning ran through Claudia’s body.

It felt like the eyeballs inserted in the hilts of the twin swords took a glance towards Claudia. No, it was not only that. As a matter of course, even though there were no parts at all on the twin swords that created an expression, she certainly felt like they were laughing.

“.....!”

Nicholas looked at Claudia, who unintentionally stood up, with a quizzical face.

“What’s the matter, Claudia?”

Though Claudia faltered for an instant due to the unknown chill that assailed her whole body, she immediately regained her calm and shook her head with a soft smile.

“No, sorry. It’s nothing.....”

“—Did you feel something from that ogre lux?”

But, Isabella smiled as if she had seen through the heart of Claudia.

“.....What do you mean by feeling something?”

“Such things occasionally happened with ogre luxes. The wielder does not choose the ogre lux, but the ogre lux chooses its wielder..... it seems that at such a time, it felt like the ogre lux smiled at him/her[3].”

“.....”

Though Claudia fixedly stared back at her mother’s smile without saying anything, she turned her gaze away before long and walked towards the door.

“H-Hey, Claudia.....?”

“I’m going to take in some fresh air outside.”

As Claudia replied only that at Nicholas’ perplexed voice, she left the VIP room.

From what she heard later, the young man of Seidoukan was defeated in a one-sided development.

*

“.....I see, thank you for the report.”

As Ernest Fairclough heaved a sigh, he thanked the three men standing in front of him.

A pure white canonical robe with lines of gilt characters and a mask with geometric patterns signified that the men were the information

interrogators (Inquisitors) of the Holy Ecumenical Council (Sinodomias) which was St. Garrardsworth Academy's Intelligence Organization.[4]

Among the six academies, it was considered to be the only Intelligence Gathering Organization not performing purely strategy activities, but the student council president Ernest knew that that was naturally just the official stance. Moreover, through managing them, he could reign as the head of the broad minded Garrardsworth that is capable of associating with various types of people.

However at the same time, it was not easy to settle it with the price of the ogre lux <Lei-Glems>, which Ernest owned.

Even now, Ernest was concerned about the report the Inquisitors brought.

“Good morning. I will come in, Ernest.”

Then, knocking sounds resounded and the student council vice-president Laetitia Blanchard entered the office. Following her, the other vice-president Kevin Holst, the student council secretary Perceval Gardner and the student council accountant Leonel Karsh showed up.

Including Ernest, those five people were the current student council executives of the St. Garrardsworth Academy and at the same time, also the five from the top of the <Page One>.

Though there were also staff other these five people that supported the student council's office work, it was those five members which substantially managed Garrardsworth.

“Geez, even though you should just leave it to us and take a break since it's the holiday, to think that you're working this early in the morning, you should take a little care of your bo—”

The vice-president, who was known for her benevolence and her elegance,

however held her tongue and openly frowned when she saw the figures of the Inquisitors. Laetitia hated them very much.

Laetitia, who irritably turned her face away from the Inquisitors who left the rooms after they (student council body) came in, turned a quizzical gaze to Ernest at the same time as the door closed.

“.....To have three Inquisitors showed up in the office at such a time, what kind of business was it?”

Certainly, one might say that it was still early morning. The morning sun finally began to come in through the window facing the east, and the chirps of brown-eared bulbul were noisily telling the beginning of the day.

“Well, let’s leave it as that for now. More importantly, give me the report, Perceval.”

Ernest plainly glossed it over as such and brought up another topic to the beautiful girl with male clothing.

“Roger. First, about the morning’s schedule; the review of various documents, the confirmation of the next Official Ranking Battle’s combination, the handling of supplementary budget’s application from the liberal arts clubs association, the response for the receipt of the petition transferred money from yesterday, and then.....”

Perceval indifferently read out loud the works that must be handled today.

“*yawn*..... Today will get really busy as well, huh. I didn’t get enough sleep.”

Kevin, who was listening to Perceval’s report that went on for a long time while crossing his hands behind his head, greatly yawned.

Kevin was a slender handsome man, but he had a somewhat frivolous

personality quite rare for a True Knight of Garrardsworth. He got a reputation as a philanderer from beautiful women and girls regardless of inside and outside of Garrardsworth. Although, knight and romance was originally an inseparable relationship; and in that sense, one could not say that he was not knight-like.

And as for Ernest, there was some part which he liked in Kevin's lightness.

".....You're a frivolous man as always. Can't you adopt a more serious attitude at least in the morning?"

The giant/big man who turned a severe gaze at such Kevin — Leonel, in contrast, was too serious a man, and also a "being stern and honest to other people" model-like man. Though Leonel had a heroic way of fighting to the extent of having the nickname of <King Spear>, in fact he was well versed in heartfelt tactics and it might be said that he was the student council's pivot that paid really meticulous attention to details even in everyday life.

"It can't be helped even if you say that, right? I had to show up in three parties yesterday, so I'm really shot."

"I'm not interested in your unseemly private life in the slightest, but it'd be a problem if it were to reflect on your duties."

"As a knight, it's my duty to respond to a lady's appeal, right? You, too, Leo, aren't you taking that part a little too lightly?"

"As usual, you're good at finding an excuse."

"Not really, I'm just speaking the truth after all."

—And as the two men's dispute was about to begin as usual, a gunshot suddenly resounded.

".....Both of you, have you listened to what I said?"

On a closer look, Perceval deployed a revolver type lux and pointed its muzzle towards the ceiling.

“The next time, I’ll aim at you, so be ready.”

To Perceval who indifferently warned so without changing her expression at all, Kevin and Leonel immediately raised the white flag. This was because they were made to realize all too well that Perceval was saying that seriously.

“.....Got it, Percy. It was my, our bad. Right, Leo?”

“.....That’s right. I’m sorry, Gardner.”

“Then, I will continue the report.”

Perceval resumed the report as if nothing happened, but the revolver was grasped in her right hand as is.

On the other hand, Laetitia, seeing the hole bored in the ceiling, became disheartened.

“Why is this girl trigger-happy to this extent.....?”

“Hahaha..... Well, we can’t only think that this is also a part of her personality.”

Conversely speaking, it was probably because Perceval was like that that she was chosen by the <Holy Grail>.

Before long, the work was apportioned by Perceval; and when the other members finished their individual report, everyone scattered to their respective rooms.

But, the last person — only Laetitia remained in the office and glared at Ernest.

“My, my, why are you making such a scary face, Laetitia?”

“Please, do not play dumb.”

Laetitia brushed it aside.

“I will have you tell me what kind of talk you had with the Inquisitors.”

It was that after all, huh.

After Ernest put his hand on his forehead and pondered for a while, he reluctantly opened his mouth.

“You’re the number one person I didn’t want to know about it, but..... It seems that Galaxy has made a move. Sinodomias seemed to have confirmed the information from the top.”

“Galaxy.....?”

“Yes, their combat unit seemed to have entered Rikka.”

Laetitia’s complexion changed at these words.

“Don’t tell me.....!”

“Thinking about the situation, their aim must be Miss Enfield.”

“No way, no matter how you look at it, at such a period.....!”

Laetitia’s voice trembled showing that she could not believe it.

In fact, Ernest was of the same opinion as well.

Although the reason was unclear, he knew that Claudia was trying to antagonize Galaxy. The issue was probably the information related Ladislav Bartsheik and the <Dusk of Jade> that she said at the interview.

But, Ernest did not think that Galaxy would go as far as to resort to such high-handed means because of only that. The matter of Ladislav was certainly a fact that Galaxy did not want to be uncovered, but even so it was

a story of the past now. If they were to deal with Claudia high-handedly in this timing when the five other Integrated Enterprise Foundations vigilantly kept a close watch on them, it would rather bring them a disadvantage.

If they were to postpone even shortly, it should be easy for them to deal with Claudia more calmly without causing discord. And yet, thesees drastic measures.

(Is Miss Enfield holding more than that..... something that Galaxy can't overlook.....?)

Ernest put his fingers together and was lost in deep thought.

In any case, now that it had come to this, the Integrated Enterprise Foundation EP, which was Garrardsworth's management parent organization, should assume a stance of watchful alertness. Since the other party (Galaxy) revealed a weakness on their own accord, their own conduct would become predominant now during the <Gryps>, so it was natural. This should also be the same for the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations.

He thought that it was a quick change of attitude for Galaxy that has protected the restrained Claudia until now, but it was understandable that this was the most probable theory.

Even if leaving out the struggle for victory in the <Gryps,>, if Galaxy were to get rid of Claudia like this, there would be a weakness to take advantage of. After all, assassinating the student council president of the academy under their supervision during the period of a <Festa> was unprecedented. Of course, they would not blunder as to allow other places to get a hold of complete evidence, but they would have no way to cover the fact, and only that was enough for the other places to use as a card. And it would become a considerable advantage against Galaxy at a time when something happened,

If by any chance, Claudia were to survive, and then if she were to win the <Festa> and urge in the matter of Ladislav and the <Dusk of Jade>, that would next become a new weakness of Galaxy.

In any case, it was best for the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations to watch calmly.

—However.

“Such a thing..... I will never accept such a thing.....!”

Laetitia bit her lips while strongly clenching her fists.

Then, she suddenly took out a portable terminal from her pocket and began to contact somewhere with hurried hands.

“.....Aah, geez! Why doesn’t it connect?!”

It looked like she tried to contact Claudia, but it did not connect. Or there was also the possibility that the other party was in a situation that she could no longer correspond with.

“Either way, it’s highly probable that your careless communication was guessed by the Sinodomias. You should either make suitable preparations or stay on the side line.”

“Kuh.....!”

Laetitia openly chewed her nails due to vexation and irritation.

Her eyes burnt with strong anger, but no one knew whether its aim was Galaxy or Claudia.

Perhaps it might be both.

“Is your anger pure righteous indignation towards Galaxy’s reckless action, Laetitia? Or your pride of being fixated in your revenge?”

“That’s.....”

Laetitia was evasive to Ernest’s nasty question.

Ernest did not know in detail what kind of connection Laetitia and Claudia had. But for Laetitia, it was clear that Claudia was some kind of special existence.

Laetitia did seem to have the intention to reveal it though.

“Well whatever. Regarding this matter, I will try investigating it a little on my end.”

“Eh?”

Laetitia looked at Ernest with a surprised face.

“B-But, if you move on your own accord, your position will be.....”

Laetitia also seemed to have expected that the EP would assume a stance of watchful alertness. No matter if Ernest was the student council president, he could naturally not go against the intention of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation; and if he was found out, he would not escape from some sort of punishment.

That said.

“Since I hold on to the nickname of <Holy Knight>, I cannot turn a blind eye to a lady’s crisis. Of course, even me as an individual.”

“.....Do you have some kind of plan?”

“No, unfortunately as you said, I have no card to play considering my position.”

When Ernest shrugged his shoulders, Laetitia pouted in displeasure.

“What are you saying now?”

“Now now, can you wait? I have no cards to play, but I have an idea.”

“An idea?”

“—First, I should have someone able to play a card move.”

Laetitia slightly tilted her head to the side at Ernest’s words.

She did not seem to get the hint yet.

“You seemed to strongly wish for a rematch against Miss Enfield’s team, but in this <Gryps>, isn’t there another person who wants to watch their match against that team?”

“Ah.....!”

As expected, having been given this hint, even Laetitia seemed to have realized.

“C-Certainly if it is that person, then they might ignore the intention of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, but..... will they move just as you expect?”

“What, I say it like this, but in the last School Festival, I also offered help in no small amount. Thinking that it’s my turn this time, that person won’t have any complaint.”

As Ernest said so, he smiled lightly and opened the portable terminal of the work desk.

“Besides, if I use a hotline, even Sinodomias wouldn’t be able to interfere so easily.”

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“—Hohou, and so you’re trying to use me, huh. Oh dear, you’ve more guts than I thought, eh, <Holy Knight>-dono.”

While jokingly glaring at the handsome face displayed in the space window, Fan XingLu rattlingly laughed.

『I apologize if I offended you, Princess.』

World Dragon Seventh Institute Yellow Dragon Temple, Audience Room.

XingLu, who sat down on a chair so big that it was mismatched with her small body, just finished the morning training.

HuFeng, who was at her side, silently stayed on a knee as is, praying very strongly in his mind that this whimsical and rampant master of his did not poke her nose again into another unneeded thing.

“I certainly owe <Holy Knight>-dono regarding the Grand Coliseum..... But, don’t you think that this request is a little mismatched compared to that time?”[5]

To that reply of XingLu, HuFeng strongly nodded many times.

『I wonder about that. If you ask me, isn’t it because Miss Lyyneheym knew of my participation that she also decided to participate at that? In that case, I think that you should also assessed the fact that there was the worth of two ranks #1 though.』



“.....Hmm, I see; you have a point.”

To this reply of XingLu, HuFeng shook his head many times.

『That said, I am well aware of my repeated impoliteness. So, how about this, Princess? How about I invite you to our Garrardsworth's Official Ranking Battle next time? —Ah, of course, in the meaning of viewing.』

“Hou!”

Ah, this is bad. It was indeed the enticement that XingLu seemed to like.

It was customary for the Official Ranking Battle to perform on a stage of the urban area, thus putting the meaning of performance in the case that the competition became the showpiece in any academy. Conversely, a confrontation between fellow students, whose names were not that well-known, was held within the academy. Of course, unless this was broadcasted, no one other than the students of that academy could view it. Utilizing this, there were academies that host competitions within the academy in order to develop trump cards for the <Festa>. In fact, XingLu herself did as such.

In addition, although battles between nameless students were given priority, conversely speaking there was no better place to discover new talents. Among the enthusiastic fans of the <Festa>, there were people who rather devoted special attention to these battles.

As HuFeng felt nervous about his bad feeling welling up, Ernest, so as to make doubly sure, continued like this.

『And above all, don't you look forward to the confrontation of your favorite pupil's team against Team Enfield, Princess? At this rate, they will lose a bit

of precious battle potential. Normally, it will be something to be pleased with, but you should be different.』

“Hmm..... That girl of <Pan-Dora> is certainly that team’s pivot. And if she were to be removed, it’ll become boring, I guess.”

『As you know, my academy’s Sinodomias is under the direct control of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, so I can’t take action in this matter. But on that point, the “Glaring Eye” on your side is under the student council’s direct control. You should be able to manage somehow, right Princess?』

The Espionage Organizations of the six academies respectively had their own special structures and their fields were different as well, but generally, they commonly shared the fact that they were substantially under the direct control of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, which was their management parent. Even if each academy had the right to make use of them, that right was only something given temporarily by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, and they themselves were also aware of who their true master was.

However regarding this, the circumstances were slightly different in this World Dragon and Allekant Academy. In Allekant where the faction doctrines were taken to the extreme, even their Espionage Organizations were separated and it was the present situation that each faction enclosed their own covert operatives.

On the other hand, the “Glaring Eye”, which was World Dragon’s secret service, was an organization that the first generation<Divine Revelations> built up for himself from the beginning, and because it was conventionally applied under the student council’s direct control since then, its relationship with the Integrated Enterprise Foundation was extremely small.

『To begin with — the result aside, I don’t think that only standing and

watching things unfolded does match the Princess' liking.』

“Hmph, aren’t you the tempting one? Don’t get too full of yourself, boy.”

Though a color of danger was mixed in the atmosphere that XingLu was clad in, that was just for a moment and it immediately vanished.

“But, well never mind. I’m on.”

HuFeng, who heard her reply, could not help holding his head.

Although he somehow knew from the beginning that it would end up like this, even so HuFeng was no so understanding to the point of giving up and saying “yes, I see”.

“.....With all due respect, Master. I do not think it to be the good idea to be easily concerned with other academies’ troubles in this period.”

“Don’t say that, HuFeng. You too will be lonely if you can’t fight an opponent in his perfect condition, right?”

“Well that’s true, but.....”

The aforementioned Team Enfield was HuFeng’s Team Yellow Dragon’s next opponent. As a fist warrior, there was also the thought of winning against an opponent going all out.

But, this and that were different things. There was no way that he would stay quiet and see how they were tempted by another academy and made to take risk.

“A-Anyway, you should at least consider it a little.....”

“No. I’ve already decided.”

As XingLu revealed an innocent smile, she clearly sounded a bell which one did not know where she took it out from.

“*sigh*.....”

HuFeng, who heard that sound, was really at wits' end this time for sure.

There was no longer any way back anymore after she sounded that bell.

In fact, before the bell sound finished ringing, it appeared in front of XingLu.

『Yes. Did you call me, XingLu-chan?』

Having suddenly appeared like wind out of nowhere was one woman. To his great displeasure, HuFeng was still not able to perceive her presence.

She had big eyes like a cat's, short hair with strong peculiarity and a short stature, but her body's line was blessed with a feminine richness. And what were peculiar above all were the countless scars left on her whole body. They were clearly carved in every place including her face as if she was proud of them.

With the current medical treatment techniques, it was easy to erase a scar. In other words, she —Arema Seiyaan, an agent of the Seventh Prefecture, the secret service “Glaring Eye” of the Nine Offspring of the Dragon, organization under World Dragon Seventh Institute student council's direct control and known of their brutality, left these scars on purpose.

“Umu, Umu. Can I ask you to do a task for me, Arema?”

『Well, if it's a job, I've no right to decline, so it can't be helped.』

Arema did not speak words, but instead used a window that she displayed next to her to speak through. This was because a choker-shaped long and narrow spell tag was put around Arema's neck, and her voice was sealed by its power.

『Hi, <Seiten Taisei>. It's been a while since the <Phoenix>'s closing

ceremony.』

『Oh, if it isn't Ernest-chan. Long time no see.』

Arema, who waved her hand with a quite indifferent smile, was quite friendly.

In fact, it was a fact that both of them were acquainted to some extent. After all, Arema was XingLu's favorite and often acted as XingLu's substitute when XingLu was absent from the event of the front stage.

『Hehehe! I'm seeing you in the <Gryps>, but looks like you're healthy. How about it, do you want to spar with me next time.....?』

『It is a great NO! As I said many times, duels are prohibited in our academy! There is no way that the student council president Ernest will violate this rule! Or rather, you act too familiarly!』

Then, Laetitia, who forced her way through on the other side of the space window as she pushed Ernest aside, lifted her eyes.

『Tsk, stingy~』

Though Arema pouted in displeasure, HuFeng, while standing to the side, strongly nodded at Laetitia's words. It was the first or the second time that he himself offered his honest opinion to Arema's rude attitude towards XingLu. Although, even when he said it, she was not the kind of person who would simply listen to it and above all, Arema was permitted to speak as such.

Arema Seiyaan also known as <Seiten Taisei> was the former rank #1 — in other words, the person with the strongest position in World Dragon Seventh Institute before XingLu appeared.

Although XingLu invited Arema, whom she defeated, to be one of her disciples, Arema declined this. However, XingLu, who valued her ability, seemed to want to have Arema in her hands by all means, thus offered her a compromise and a deal.

It was to make Arema not a disciple, but a member of the “Glaring Eye”, and in return, she was given the right of being able to propose a duel to XingLu freely. Arema, who was as much of a battle maniac as XingLu, agreed to this and to this day has challenged XingLu whenever possible.

『So, what work is it?』

“Before that, Arema, the story that Galaxy’s underlings entered this Rikka yesterday, have you heard of it?”

『Hmm? No, I’m completely clueless.』

Arema shook her head with a puzzled face.

“It seems to be information that Garrardsworth’s Sinodomias got a hold of. Our side is again taking it quite easy as I see.”

As HuFeng said so with the utmost sarcasm, Arema scratched her head without particular showing any sign of being timid.

『The extent of the information network laid out between there and the “Glaring Eye” is different, so I would like you to refrain from comparing it.』

“Well, that’s fine. More importantly, I don’t really want to let those guys do whatever they want. That’s this time’s work”

A sharp light ran through XingLu’s eyes for an instant.

『Hmm..... I see. So, about Galaxy’s underlings, who are you talking about?』

“According to <Holy Knight>-dono, it seems to be the Yabuki Clan (Knight

Emmitt). It seems that there was also the figure of the Head among them.”

『Heeh, how interesting! Speaking of the Yabuki’s Head, he’s quite strong, right? I’m suddenly fired up.』

Striking her fist to the palm of her hand, Arema revealed a ferocious smile.

The flames shining in her eyes were similar to XingLu’s when she got fired up.

“Well, unfortunately I don’t know the current Head’s skill, but I’ve got the memory of the bout I had with one several generations ago. He was.....”

XingLu tilted her head as she dug up into her memory and then clapped her hands before long.

“Oh, that’s right. If I remember correctly, I took him one arm that time. Oh dear, how nostalgic.”

『Heeh! I can’t wait to fight that kind of opponent!』

“I’ll say just in case, but the techniques that they use are kind of troublesome. And it’d be better for you not to fight the Head in particular.”

『And do you think that I’ll listen to that?』

Arema’s smile grew more and more fiendish.

“.....Well, I don’t mind it as long as you properly handle the work though.”

While listening to their exchanges, HuFeng frowned as his headache kept getting intense.

Why on earth do only these kind of people gathered around XingLu?

『.....Looks like the talk is settled. Well then Princess, is it all right to leave this matter to your side for the time being?』

Then, Ernest said with a wry smile.

“Sure. So, what do you guys intend to do?”

『Of course, we intend to do all we can on our side, but..... if we could somehow manage it, we wouldn't have expressly approached you with such a talk. Right, Laetitia?』

Ernest's gaze across the space window was turned to his side for a moment. He seemed to give a warning to a friend. Then, it also meant that there were people that seemed to act rashly in Garrardsworth.

“Hohou, I see. That's also true.”

『Well then, we leave it to you, Princess.』

Then, the space window disappeared and the communication ended.

『Well then, I guess I'll begin with the preparations.』

After ascertaining it, Arema soundlessly disappeared as well in the same way as when she appeared.

While gritting his teeth in vexation as he could not sense her movements as expected although he squared off to some extent, HuFeng said to XingLu

“But, is it really all right, Master. As expect, antagonizing the Integrated Enterprise Foundation at this period is.....”

“Don't worry about it. As long as I, *<Divine Revelations>*, am here, they won't make a move on us. Rather, this year's *<Gryps>* went so smoothly that it felt very boring. An event of this extent will add a rather moderate spice to it.”

She said so and innocently laughed.

Although he understood it, HuFeng grandly sighed to the fact these kinds of people gathered around XingLu precisely because XingLu herself had such a personality.

Translator and references notes

[1] as in utilitarianism which is a theory saying that actions are right if they are useful, something like that

[2] speaking here of the meaning of point acquisition

[3] wielder he chooses, that is

[4] From here on, I'll use Inquisitors and Sinodomias instead of information interrogators and Holy Ecumenical Council

[5] she basically means that he's offered less and now is asking more, something like that I guess

Chapter 3 – Morning/Recollection III

“Y...Y-Y-You confessed, you said...!?”

Although Julis tried to ask as calmly as possible, her voice could not help but sound nervous.

“Yes.”

Training room before noon. As Saya nodded calmly, Julis and Kirin widened their eyes in shock.

“W-Wait, Saya. In other words, does that mean, um... that you conveyed your feelings to Ayato...?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

Even when she asked again just to make sure, the answer did not change.

“Y-Yes, I see, that’s right...”

It really seemed to be true. As soon as she realized it, an indescribable feeling of anxiety welled up in Julis’ heart.

“No, but, um... and then...”



There were many things that crossed her mind that she wanted to ask Saya, but she was not able to easily put them into words.

After all, it was a confession.

And moreover, it was a confession from Saya, who was a childhood friend for Ayato and, although they had been separated for several years, the closest and most reliable existence to him.

From a third party's viewpoint, even if Saya had bluntly expressed her good will, the fact that she, who should have only maintained their past relationship, took a step forward meant that it would not be strange even if there was something similar from Ayato's side.

And assuming that there could be a similar change in Ayato, it meant that there was enough possibility of him accepting Saya's confession; and in that case—

As Julis' eyes were spinning around in circles and she held her head, her train of thought ground to a halt.

"U-Um! Err, a-and then, what was Ayato-senpai's reply.....!?"

Then, Kirin, who was stiff like a stone statue until now, finally came to her senses and asked so with teary eyes while panicking more than usual.

(Yes, that's it!)

Julis abruptly came to her senses and nodded vigorously as Kirin asked precisely what she wanted to ask.

However upon close inspection, Kirin's eyes were also going around in circles just like Julis earlier and one could see that she was at her limit.

Rather, her feet were trembling and it looked like she would collapse at any moment; her whole body trembled like a wet small animal's and she seemed to be much more confused than Julis.

"He didn't give me a reply yet."

"Eh.....?"

"I told him that he can give a reply anytime. I only wanted to convey my feelings."

But in contrast with the perplexed Julis and Kirin, Saya plainly declared so.

"I-I see....."

Although Julis heaved a sigh of relief for the time being, the next moment she felt irritation to herself.

(Why do I have to feel relieved about that.....?!)

Including the matter of Ayato and Sylvia at the School Festival, there had been many cases recently where her heart had been thrown out of order.

(That's right, regardless of whom he associates with, it doesn't anything to do with me..... no, well, he's a teammate, so it isn't completely unrelated to me; but anyway he's free to do as he pleases, I have no say in..... no, but, he was the one who came and told me face-to-face that "he wants to become my strength", so even I can at least make a complaint..... No, no, it isn't really like I have anything to complain about, but..... Ah!)

Julis nearly reached an impasse in her thoughts once again, but as she somehow came back to her senses by herself this time, she shook her head many times as if to shake off these thoughts.

"Phew....."

Kirin, too, perhaps because she felt relieved at Saya's words, weakly sat

down on the floor.

“B-But, why are you expressly telling us that.....?”

“I just want to play fair with my rivals..... Well, you as well, do your best.”

To these words plainly said by Saya, both Kirin, who suddenly hopped from her seated position as is, and Julis, with a red face, shouted.

“N-No, I-I don’t really.....!”

“T-That’s right! W-What are you saying.....?!”

Looking at Julis and Kirin, Saya nodded expressionlessly.

“If that’s the case, it’s fine then. But, don’t regret later.”

“Aw.....”

“Gunuh.....”

For some reason, Saya’s words today felt strangely heavy.

(N-No, no good, no good. Calm down.....)

Julis’ pace has been disturbed for some reason since a little while ago.

As she calmed down her heart by taking a deep breath, she asked a question different from Kirin’s to Saya.

“N-No, well, more importantly. I don’t mean to pry too much into a private matter, but why on earth did you do it in the middle of the <Gryps>? One wrong move and it could become a seed of trouble within the team..... No, it’s not really like we’re that narrow-minded; I ask just to be sure.”

“Yea, about that..... I’m sorry.”

Then unexpectedly, Saya honestly bowed her head.

“The timing was purely due to my selfishness, so I apologize for it. But—”

As Saya said up to there, she stared straight at Julis’ eyes.

“It may selfish of me to say this, but I think that when the match will come, everyone shouldn’t be so weak-minded as to be affected by such a trivial matter. That’s why, it’s all right.”

“That’s.....”

Since Julis thought that it was in fact as Saya said, for an instant, she was at a loss for words to return. Both Julis and Kirin could concentrate without problem in a serious match; she had that conviction.

This was because rather than keep going on about the importance of the matter, there is the problem of separating it into different part to the very end. Both Julis and Kirin had a place that they were aiming at in the <Festa> and a reason why they had to win no matter what.

And, Julis knew that Saya did not have any reason to do it.

Saya purely fought for Ayato. That’s why she was probably able to take the big step called confession, and no one could blame her for it.

“But, only Enfield is different. I might be a little anxious regarding her.”

“Eh.....? The president, is it?”

To these words, Kirin’s eyes flickered wonderingly.

Julis had the same expression though.

“There’s probably no problem with Claudia. Even considering her personality, I think that she’s the number one person about whom you can come to a clear decision on that area though.”

Claudia took a quite assertive approach towards Ayato, and there was no

mistaking that Julis was concerned about it; but when it came to how serious she was about her feelings, even Julis could not judge.

However, in contrast to Kirin who nodded several times, Saya shook her head with a serious look.

“You’re wrong. I understood it right away the first time I met her. Enfield is serious.”

“.....Hou. Is it an affirmation based on some firm reason?”

“Intuition”

Though Saya’s reply was very simple, Julis already understood that she could not take it lightly.

“Hmm.....”

—Then, the training room’s door opened there, and Ayato who was wearing training gear and with sweat streaming down his forehead, walked in.

“Sorry, guess I barely came on time.....? I was immersed in my independent training.”

Seeing as he was breathing slightly heavily, he probably ran his way here.

“Ayato, good morning.”

“!..... Ah, Saya. Good morning.”

Saya ran up to Ayato with a smile, and Ayato gently greeted her as usual.

But, Julis did not overlook the nervousness that ran on his face, although it was just for an instant.

“It’s all right, even if you didn’t rush, everyone hasn’t gathered yet. Come on, Ayato.”

Saya took out a towel and handed it to Ayato.

Was it their imagination or did it feel like Saya was closer to Ayato than before? Although there was originally the fact that they were childhood friends and that closeness of Saya was more like intimacy between family or siblings, the atmosphere was somewhat different now.

“.....Yes, thank you.”

On the other hand, the attitude of Ayato, who received the towel, was, though just only a little, awkward. One could guess that he was obviously conscious of Saya. But, one could also see that their relationship was by no means advancing into the bad direction.

“Errr, then I’ll wash this towel and return it later, so.....”

“No, it’s fine. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“No, I can’t do that.”

“.....Boo, I’m saying that it’s fine.”

Saya, who pouted and tried to take the towel, strongly glued to Ayato.

“Ah.....”

Then, as she noticed it, Saya abruptly separated her body. Although her expression did not change, she slightly blushed and cast her eyes down.

It was not a reaction that Saya would have made before (before the confession, that is).

Julis and Kirin were looking at such Saya and Ayato at a distance.

“.....W-What’s wrong, Kirin? If you have anything you want to ask Ayato, you should just go ask.”

“Eeeh!? I-I-I don’t really have anything.....”

Kirin curled herself up with a face which seemed like she would cry anytime, but even so she timidly opened her mouth while looking up at Julis with upturned eyes.

“D-Does Julis-senpai, er, um.....”

“I-I don’t really have anything to ask. Yes, that’s right. Absolutely nothing!”

“Aw..... I-Is that so? I’m sorry.....”

“N-No, it isn’t like I’m angry, you see?”

Julis hurriedly comforted Kirin and then greatly exhaled so as to relax. It was to no avail in any way though.

“.....But she goes have courage. We should honestly praise her for that.”

“.....Yes.”

The form was different, but Julis understood all too well the fear of taking the first step in order to change something.

Saya’s determination deserved her respect.

“By the way, you say that everyone hasn’t gathered..... it’s already time, right?”

There, while Ayato checked the time on his portable terminal, he looked around in the training room.

They should have scheduled to carry out a strategy meeting today in preparation for tomorrow’s semifinal. It could be said that Team Yellow Dragon, their opponent of the semifinal, was definitely their most powerful enemy so far.

Especially the strength of Woo Xiao Fay alias <Hagun Star>, who was their (Team Yellow Dragon) greatest battle potential, was overwhelming; and

defeat would be inevitable should they challenge him without taking any measures. The spearmanship, Taijutsu and Star Senjutsu that he displayed in the second round— even though even only one among these was enough a threat, Xiao Fay possessed all of them.

“That’s right, but the President isn’t here yet.....”

“To think that she’s late; that’s quite rare.”

To Kirin’s words, Julis continued as such.

As far as Julis remembered, there has never been a precedent in the past where Claudia came late at the appointed time.

“Oh, I’ve got a call. Speaking of the devil, how..... Hmm?”

When Julis took out her portable terminal, she knitted her brows. It was an unregistered number.

As she opened a space window while feeling dubious, a terminal screen in blackout state was unfolded.

It was voice communication.

『……! Ah, thanks god! It’s finally connected!』

Moreover, the sound was very bad as there was too much noise. Even so, Julis was familiar with that voice.

“.....This voice, is it Laetitia?”

Although they were acquainted, it was not to the extent that they would contact each other directly.

『That’s right. There is no time, so I’ll go right to the point. Is Claudia there?』

“What is it, out of the blue?Well whatever, she hasn’t yet come here

today.”

『Ah, I thought so.....!』

A voice filled with anguish leaked out from the other side of the window space.

“What the hell is going on? If you’ve business with Claudia, you should just call her directly.”

『It’s because I can’t do it that I’m calling you like this! Anyway, please go look for her at once and ensure her safety!』

“Her safety, you say.....? Wait, what the hell do you mean by that?! What are you talking about!?”

From the sense of urgency transmitted by the voice, Julis guessed that it was not trivial matter.

Ayato and company, who were listening to the conversation on the side, kept quiet with serious expressions.

『Even this line, which I took measures against the Sinodomias, will hold safely for still around 30 seconds. So, I will tell you only about my business.

—Galaxy has taken action.』

“!”

With that alone, they were able to roughly understand the situation.

“I got it. I don’t know the details, but I give you my thanks.”

『And one more thing, there is something that I want to tell Amagiri Ayato.』

“To Ayato.....?”

When Julis made an eye signal, Ayato also gave a small nod and stood beside

Julis.

“What do you want to tell me?”

『That is—』

*

Quite a time has passed after having watched the <Lindvolus>.

“Claudia, this is a present for you.”

Claudia stared, as she was unusually surprised from the bottom of her heart, at the case that Isabella held out while saying so. After all, for as long as she could remember, this was the first time that she got something like a present from this mother of hers.

Claudia was bought things she wanted and, while being a child, she was given an almost inexhaustible amount of funds; but that and this were different stories.

“What on earth is this sudden turn of events?”

When Claudia asked so while smiling wryly, Isabella kindly answered.

“Nothing special. It will be your birthday soon, right?”

“That’s right, but.....”

“Well anyway, look at this.”

Isabella released the lock of the case that she put on the living room’s desk before the perplexed Claudia.

“This is.....”

Seeing it, which was stored in the case, Claudia unintentionally held her breath.

“Yes, it is <Pan-Dora>.”

“—!”

A pair of ogre lux sleeping like twin fetuses. Claudia, who had its activation body in front of her, felt a shiver going throughout her body exactly similar to the one that she had felt in the battle hall of the <Lindvolus> before.

Seeing Claudia abruptly standing from the chair and drawing back, Isabella narrowed her eyes joyfully.

“Oh my, Claudia. What’s the matter?”

“.....It’s nothing.”

“Did you taste the same sensation as in the time of the <Lindvolus>? In that case, it is splendid. It means that you have been chosen by this <Pan-Dora> after all.”

Isabella spread her hands as if that was something extremely delightful. As Claudia heaved a small sigh in front of such Isabella, she pulled herself together.

“But, I am amazed that you were able to take out an ogre lux. I heard that the management of ogre luxes was quite rigorous, but.....”

No matter if she was an executive of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, wasn’t it too selfish to take it out from Asterisk in order to give it to her daughter?

“Fufufu, who do you think I am?”

But, Isabella plainly declared so.

“Well, actually, due to the matter of the previous <Lindvolus>, this <Pan-Dora>had been designated to be sealed. And so after explaining the

situation, I borrowed it before it was sent to one of Galaxy's research facilities. The people there also seemed to want some more data, so I was rather welcomed to borrow it."

"I am honored to be able to receive such a dangerous thing."

Even though Claudia returned such sarcasm, Isabella remained indifferent and did not break her smile.

"Of course, if you say that you don't want it, then that's it. You don't really need to force yourself. But, a case of someone being chosen by an ogre lux is extremely rare, and when looking only the ability, <Pan-Dora> is a powerful weapon. I thought that it might someday help you, but....."

"....."

Although it was her mother, it was difficult for Claudia to read Isabella's real intention.

In the viewpoint of self-interest, there was the approach of using her daughter for the data collection of <Pan-Dora> that had almost no one compatible with it. It would certainly lead to the benefit of Seidoukan Academy which was managed by Galaxy.

But in the viewpoint of Galaxy as a whole, it might not hold so much interest, and Claudia could not imagine that a person of Isabella's position would expressly take the initiative in it.

In that case, was it purely meant to be a present to her daughter just as she said? In fact, if the foresight ability was the real thing, then <Pan-Dora> was definitely a powerful and unparalleled ogre lux. To the point that it could become an indicator for Claudia who had yet to decide her future path.

However, as Claudia said sarcastically, it was a very dangerous thing. For a present to her daughter, one might said that it was extremely unsuitable.

But even in that case, in anticipation to Claudia's wisdom, she might have judged that it was all right. Claudia's past achievements were enough to merit such an evaluation after all.

(.....Probably, it is all of these.) [1]

After thinking to that extent, Claudia reached such a conclusion.

Regardless of it being objects or people, in most cases, an action is taken between many overlapped complicated circumstances .If he was a human like Isabella, then all the more.

Therefore, Claudia rather decided to choose it for a simple reason.

"Understood. I shall gratefully borrow it."

It was because she was very happy about a present from her mother.

"That's fine. It was worth giving it as a present."

Though Isabella laughed as she said so, as if suddenly remembering something, she clapped her hands and called a servant.

"Oh yes, speaking of which, it seemed that another present arrived."

"Another?"

Judging from her way of speaking, it seemed to something unrelated to Isabella.

When she opened the box that the servant carried in, there were a bear stuffed toy of about 30 cm in size and a message card inside.

"Oh my, how lovely."

".....I wonder whom it is from."

Both the fabric and the sewing of the stuffed toy were splendid — in any

case, it was something that was sent to suit with Claudia's taste — and one could perceive with a look that it was a very high-class item.

When she wonderingly opened the message card as she had no idea at all of who could have sent it, an unexpected name was written down there.

"Laetitia.....?"

"Oh, it is from the young lady of the Blanchard House, huh"

Isabella nodded by herself as she was convinced.

"You two are quite close, eh."

"No, it's not really like that....."

In the message card were written the words "next time for sure, I will defeat you, so prepare yourself".

"But in that case, you'd better hide it in front of Nicholas."

".....That's right."

When going back, the Enfield House of Claudia and the Blanchard House of Laetitia, seemed to have some kind of fate for several hundred years since the Great Alliance War; and Nicholas, as the direct descendant, harbored antipathy towards the Blanchard Household.

Frankly speaking, though it was not that much her hobby, as expected Claudia could not bring herself to throw away a present that she was given expressly.

"Still, now that it has come to this, I will have to return her something as a gift as well. If I am not mistaken, her birthday should be..... in February, right?"

Since it was June now, it was quite a long way off.

“In that case, there will be the ball of the Opera House of Vienna, right? How about give it to her at that time?”

The ball of the Opera House of Vienna was the star of the high society in the past and even now, but its nature has changed after the revival of the *<Ember Tears>*. Especially, the age of debutante was greatly reduced; this was the result of the European High Society after the revival trying to look for a candidate for it (debutante) faster rather than searching for a superior bloodline.

Even the Houses famed as prestigious could not survive without relations with the Integrated Enterprise Foundation at present. To that end, people with superior ability inside the Household were necessary no matter how few there were.

“.....Well, there’s still more time, so I guess that I shall choose something suitable for her.”

As Claudia muttered so, she compared the bear stuffed toy and *<Pan-Dora>* and then smiled wryly to the surreal difference between them.

—However, this choice of receiving *<Pan-Dora>* would eventually change Claudia’s life greatly.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The next morning, when the day has not yet fully risen, Claudia’s scream echoed in the mansion.

As a servant rushed, Claudia was breathing out roughly while lying down with her eyes wide open and grasping the sheet so tightly that her fingers

turned white.

The contents of her dream had already become fuzzy like morning fog and disappeared.

But the continuous agony and overwhelming fear of the “death” that Claudia tasted by the price of <Pan-Dora>— they easily destroyed the nihilism of the very young Claudia and gave a shock strong enough to knock down her partial self-consciousness, although precocious.

“Oh my..... As expected, looks like it was severe.”

Isabella, who had come over before she was aware of it, looked down at Claudia with a disappointed face.

“Haa.....Haa.....!”

As her eyes reflected the figure of her mother, Claudia desperately fixed her breathing

“Now then, what will you do, Claudia? Will you part with <Pan-Dora>?”



As though she knew that it would turn out like this, and yet while oozing only a meager disappointment, Isabella said.

“.....”

Even so, Claudia weakly shook her head to her question.

“Hou.....”

Isabella knitted her brows as she was slightly surprised.

Claudia's reason for this (reply) was also simple.

It was only her willpower — her rebellious heart.

While Claudia was surprised at the fact that there were such childish feelings inside her, she mustered her strength and raised her body.

“.....It is a precious present. I shall enjoy it a little more.”

As a result, Claudia's willpower was maintained for nearly one month.

Considering the fact that <Pan-Dora>'s wielders until now had not held even three days, it might be said that Claudia possessed an astounding mental strength.

However, the nightmare repeated every night mercilessly undermined Claudia's mind and body and steadily debilitated her.

On the bed, at that night when Claudia, who could no longer clearly make even the difference between reality and nightmare, as expected had begun to feel her limit—

Claudia met Ayato in that dream.

*

“Claudia! Are you there, Claudia?!”

There was no reaction at all even though Julis violently knocked the door.

Julis and company, who received the call from Laetitia, hastily headed to Claudia’s room in the Seidoukan Academy’s girl dormitory.

But, the room door was locked as is; as there was no sign of Claudia coming out no matter how much she knocked, Julis gritted her molars.

“Damn! How careless of me.....!”

Honestly speaking, she did not expect Galaxy to take action with this timing.

No, more exactly, she had treated Claudia’s words lightly.

Making enemies of Galaxy — she prepared herself for it when she was first told about it by Claudia, but since the <Gryps> began, nothing happened in particular, rather it might be said it went smoothly so far.

Though they by no means let their guards down, she could deny the fact that rather than Galaxy, they were more focused on the next match.

All of these were thanks to the plan that Claudia worked out, even though it doesn’t mean that Galaxy did not loosen their hands.

“.....Julis, step aside. At this point, we can’t choose our methods.”

While Saya said so, she deployed a large-scale lux.

“Eh!? H-Hold on Saya-san, no matter how you look at it, using it here in the dorm is a little.....!”

Though Kirin tried to stop at Saya while panicking, Julis was also of the same opinion this time.

“Okay, do it, Saya!”

“.....Boom”

The light bullet fired from the lux blew off the door with a roaring sound and wind raged.

Though other boarding students turned up wondering why on earth was going on, Julis ignored them and set her feet in the room.

“What the hell is this.....?”

She looked around in the room and was amazed at the disastrous scene. This was because the inside of the room, be it the living room or the bedroom, was senselessly laid waste.

For an instant, she thought it to be the aftermath of Saya’s bombarding, but the damage range was too wide to be it. The sofa was overturned, the bed sheet was tattered and torn and countless cuts ran on both the wall and the carpet.

And above all.

“.....Close-range combat with weapons seemed to have taken place here.”

Kirin, who examined the floor, said so with a severe expression.

“I can’t distinguish the footprints, but it’s likely that they attacked the President in great numbers..... There’s a bloodstain.”

“Kuh.....!”

Julis unintentionally bit her lips, but Saya lightly tapped her shoulders.

“It isn’t settled that it (blood) belongs to Enfield. She might have turned the tables back to those ruffians.”

“That’s right, but.....”

Assuming that that was the case, it was strange that Claudia was not here.

“The amount of bleeding doesn’t seem to be that much. Also..... I think that the President may have escaped. I assume that she escaped after she was attacked.”

Then, Kirin, who was examining the floor, said with serious face.

“Why can you declare that?”

“It’s only a guess from the situation, but..... if the President was attacked by Galaxy’s subordinates and they succeeded in it, I don’t think that they would leave the room like this. They may be able to crush her whenever they want if it’s inside Seidoukan, but even so they should do the minimum cleaning up afterwards. Yet, look at this room’s disastrous scene.....”

Perhaps due to the fact that her uncle was a person of Galaxy, Kirin was unexpectedly well-informed on the Integrated Enterprise Foundation.

“I see.....! In other words, those guys had no room to do it.....!”

“.....I see.”

Saya also nodded as she agreed.

They did not know whether it was staff-wise or time wise, but it meant that there was something which should have had priority over it.

“And then.....”

Saying so, Kirin turned her eyes to the window.

Though the window glass facing the balcony was broken, the glass splinters did not fall inside the room; they were all scattered outward.

As Julis rushed up to the window, sure enough bloodstain continued to the balcony sporadically.

“So, she escaped from here, huh.....”

“.....Anyway, we should tell Ayato what we've found so far.”

Saya said while pulling the sleeve of Julis who scowled outside of the window.

“Yes, you're right. I want to check the situation on his side as well.”

Julis took out her portable terminal while praying for Claudia's safety.

Translator and references notes

[1] meaning that Isabella gave <Pan-Dora> not only purely as a present, but also with the above-mentioned ulterior motives

Chapter 4 – Noon

—Le Wolfe Black Institute, Student Council room.

“.....The Yabuki Clan is moving, you say?”

『You could say that Galaxy finally ran out of patience, I guess.』

“Hmph, it’s none of my business.”

Dirk Eberwein spat out a response, his face carved with deep wrinkles on the middle of his forehead as he lay out on his chair with his legs stretched out.

Madiath Mesa, looking at Dirk through the space window, shrugged his shoulders unnaturally.

『Oh dear.....』

“Rather, if that woman were to disappear, it’ll save me the trouble as Seidoukan will become easy to deal with. I don’t think they’d find anybody as outstanding as her any time soon.”

『I see, so even you highly valued her ability, huh.』

Dirk glared at the space window at Madiath, seeing as his voice seemed to have a teasing tone.

“If you’ve called just to have such a worthless chat, I’ll cut the communication. Unfortunately, I don’t have any time to spare, you see?”

『Now, now, wait. You’re short-tempered as usual, eh.』

As Madiath said so to soothe him, he finally got to the main point.

『The truth is, I happened to hear something just a little while ago. It looks like that young lady Enfield also knew about Varda.』

“What did you say.....?”

As expected, even Dirk changed his complexion to this.

Dirk and company were members of the Golden Bough Alliance, and the existence of Varda, known also by the name of <Varda Vaos> as the only ogre lux in this world capable of acting of its own free will, was a top secret only known by a small handful of people. Currently, except the Golden Bough Alliance’s members, this fact was only known by Galaxy’s top executives.

Other than them, those who knew of Varda were all either buried in darkness, or had their memories erased by the mind interference which was the ability of Varda herself.

『She used it either to negotiate with Galaxy..... or threaten them, well something like that probably.』

“She’s crazy after all.”

Doing something like that with the Integrated Enterprise Foundation as the other party could only be described as folly.

『Yes, the problem is there. Do you think that someone who even you recognize as talented would make such a stupid move?』

“.....What do you mean?”

『In other words, what has happened so far might have been all according to her plot.』

After a brief pause, Madiath continued.

『Think a little about it, Galaxy went as far as to drag out the Yabuki Clan in order to deal with a student of the academy they managed; if you think about it normally, it makes no sense, right? Well of course, after all if they just want to deal with her, they could just handle it secretly after making up some sort of reason to have a restriction placed on her.』

“Therefore, so that they don’t make any careless moves, she aimed for the period of the <Festa>, and moreover, by pretending herself to be a snake in their bosom[1], she induced the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations to check Galaxy.....”

『And when it comes to this situation, for Galaxy, there was no better move than having her secretly disappear — in other words, an assassination.』

Thinking so, it was kind of unnatural.

But.

“In the end, the biggest problem remained. We don’t know why she’s doing that.”

For Claudia, it was an act without merit that only cornered her.

『As expected, even I don’t know the reason..... But, there’s only one thing that I can say.』

“Hmm?”

『She’s the same type of human as us. No matter what her wish is, she doesn’t mind sacrificing all other things in order to realize it..... No, in the first place, she’s human who doesn’t even think about other things.』

“.....Hmph”

Don’t lump me together with you, Dirk cursed so in his heart to Madiath’s

words.

『Well, the situation is like that, so I think that we should slightly pay attention to her.』

“There’s no meaning to paying attention to her as she’ll die.”

Speaking of the Yabuki Clan, it was a renowned group from old days in the underworld of the Far East.

No matter how talented Claudia was, he did not think it possible for her to escape from them.

『Hahaha, that’s right. But — I don’t think we can know that for sure.』

After smiling suspiciously, Madiath ended the communication

“.....”

Dirk, who was left alone, pondered for a while with folded arms, but before long, he opened a space window again while clicking his tongue.

“—Go get Corona by the evening. And then as always, spread information indirectly. The content is..... Seidoukan’s student council president seemed to have gone missing.”

*

“.....I see, got it. Well then, I’ll contact you later, so you guys as well..... yes, I leave it to you.”

As Ayato closed the concealed space window, he took a small breath and began to talk in a low voice.

“It seemed that she wasn’t in her room in the dorm. And, according to what Julis said, it seems like there were traces of fight in the room.....”

A gloomy coffee shop in the outskirts of the commercial area — at the seat in the back alongside the wall, there was no other figures except Ayato's. He sat at a four-person table that was dimly lit, only accompanied by a mug filled with mud-like coffee.

“It’s just as I expected, huh.”

Thus, that voice could be heard from a seat behind Ayato.

Though it was muffled, the voice's owner was St. Garrardsworth Academy student council vice-president, Laetitia Blanchard.

When he sent a fleeting glance behind him, a woman that was unsuitable for the atmosphere of this shop elegantly carried a tea cup to her mouth.

Her gorgeousness clearly felt out of place in the shop, but Ayato could do nothing about it.

“At any rate, I am honestly surprised that you knew such a place. It is certainly the most suitable place for a secret talk, but..... it is hard to say that it is a shop with a very good quality of customers.”

While there was admiration in Laetitia's voice, there was also a slightly blaming tone in it.

“No, this place is a shop I was told as well.....”

Ayato vindicated so without turning around.

It was a shop where he met Irene in order to get information from her when Flora was kidnapped before. There was no helping that Laetitia was suspicious as it was without doubt a shop with a suspicious atmosphere.

In other words, it meant this atmosphere was obviously closer to Le Wolfe's more than Garrardsworth's.

“Well it saved me the trouble this time, and I will not inquire any further. I am unfamiliar with such things after all. However.....”

“.....However?”



“I do not really appreciate the fact that you come and go in very suspicious places. From what I have heard, it seems like you often go to the Entertainment District as well. Since you are intimate with Claudia, you must polish your character a little more.”

“No, I went there because of another purpose, so it can’t be helped.....”

Though he tried to explain himself, Laetitia did not lend an ear to it.

“Speaking of the Enfield House, it is a prestigious House alongside my Blanchard House in Europe. If you were to behave in a way that is not suitable for that name, not only you, but also Claudia would be laughed at. I cannot forgive such a thing.....!”

“Yea.....”

For some reason, Laetitia felt indignant all by herself on her own accord.

However, judging from her way of speaking, it seemed to be a fact that Laetitia was seriously concerned about Claudia.

“Listen well, Amagiri Ayato. To tell you the truth, I have not yet acknowledged you. I am only relying on you this time only because I have no other choice. So, please bear at least that in mind.”

“Errr..... So, what do you want to tell me?”

As the talk would not advance if he were to let it continue like that, Ayato urged her as such.

“Ah..... Ahem. That’s right.”

Perhaps because Laetitia finally calmed down, an unnatural cough was heard from behind him.

In the first place, because Laetitia expressly said that she wanted to meet him directly and talk with him, Ayato decided to meet her in this shop that he designated.

He heard that phone communication did not seem to be possible here.

“If possible, I also want to go looking for Claudia quickly though.”

“.....It is a talk that might be necessary in order to save that Claudia.”

Laetitia said after hesitating only a little.

In that case, he must hear it.

“Haa..... I will say this beforehand, but this is a story that I heard from Claudia herself and she made me promise not to tell anyone about it. I did not intend to break that promise on my honor, but..... I have no other choice considering this situation.”

“.....? What do you mean?”

But, Laetitia, not answering his question, asked a different question.

“Before that, do you know the wish that Claudia wants to fulfill in this Asterisk?”

“Yeah, well..... If I’m not mistaken, she said that she would like to meet face-to-face with Professor Ladislav Bartsheik who takes part in the <Dusk of Jade>.”

This was what Claudia told in the winner interview, so it was a well-known fact even without asking Ayato and company. But as for Ayato, although vague, he wondered whether Claudia’s goal was not somewhere else.

“Well, that’s right. I also saw when she said that during the interview. But — it was totally different from her wish that she told me before.”

“Eh.....?”

As if holding back Ayato, who was about to turn around unintentionally, Laetitia continued.

“I shall talk about it in order. She and I were good rivals who competed for the championship every year in the martial tournament of Europe when we were children..... Well, in the end, I have never been able to win though!”

“Yea.....”

Frustration to the point that she could bite off a handkerchief at any moment blurred in Laetitia’s words.

“Ahem. Anyway, a certain year in the martial tournament, in unusually high spirits, she said this. “I finally found a wish that I want to fulfill”.”

“Claudia said that in high spirits.....?”

It has only been more than one year since Ayato met Claudia, but he has never seen such a figure of hers.

“Yes, I was also surprised and tried to inquire about the details; but she would not tell me any further about it. I, who became irritated then because of that, proposed a bet before the final against her. The content was that if I were to win the next match, she would have to tell me about it.”

“But..... Blanchard-san, um, you said earlier that you had never won against Claudia.”

In that case, it meant that that bet ended with her defeat.

Then, perhaps because she became sullen at these words of Ayato, Laetitia said by fast taking as she was slightly irritated.

“T-That’s right, but please listen properly to my story until the end! At the time of that tournament, she was clearly feeling strange. From what I heard

later on, it seemed that she had just obtained <Pan-Dora>. Since it was in violation of the tournament's regulations, she did not use it, but.....”

“<Pan-Dora>.....? Eh, but please wait a minute. It is a story of when you two were still children, right?”

It was the premise that an ogre lux was originally used only in Asterisk. Of course, there were exceptions as such, so it was not impossible to carry it out after going through a procedure like when Ayato visited Lieseltania.

If it was the wish of the <Festa> winner, he or she could obtain the ownership rights — even in that case, it would be only for his lifetime, and the ogre lux would eventually go back to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation[2] — but that an ogre lux was given to a child, who was not even a student of Asterisk yet, was probably an exception among exceptions.

“I was surprised, too..... Well, judging from her mother’s position, it’s something easy to do. At the time, that person seemed already close to be a central figure of Galaxy after all. Besides, it did not seem like <Pan-Dora> was in Claudia’s hands all the time. It seemed to be often collected for data analysis.”

Laetitia paused once there and put the teacup to her mouth.

“Anyway, as there were such circumstances — the final between me and her, whose condition has clearly deteriorated, ended up in a draw.”

“A draw.....”

“In other words, there was neither victory nor defeat. Then, with the condition of not revealing it to anyone, while laughing teasingly saying “I will tell you about only half of my wish”, she whispered into my ear.”

There, Laetitia heaved a small sigh and continued.

“Her — Claudia’s wish is “to dedicate herself to her destined partner”.”

“.....Huh?”

Because it was too unexpected words, he unintentionally leaked a strange voice.

“Her destined partner? Dedicate herself?”

Ayato did not know what kind of personality Claudia had when she was a child, but at least that did not match the current Claudia’s image.

“Well, I knew that you would have such a reaction. I also thought at first that she was just teasing me and even when I asked about that destined partner of hers, she said “I have not yet met him”.”

I see. Certainly, it would naturally be assumed that she was being teased.

“But, she enrolled at Seidoukan, became President..... and while observing her actions, I then realized it. At least, there is no mistaking that the destined partner whom she was talking about is you, Amagiri Ayato.”

“Eeeh!?”

This time, because of too much surprise, he unintentionally looked back while raising his voice.

He then hurriedly looked in front again immediately and lowered his voice.

“.....How on earth did it turn out like that?”

“Honestly speaking, I thought at first that you might have deceived her, but.....”

“No, even if you said that, I.....”

“Rest assured. I am not that poor a judge of character to that extent. Judging from your actions so far, I at least understand that you certainly are not a

bad person."

While saying so, Laetitia's voice looked slightly displeased.

"Anyway, even so it is a fact that she invested an extraordinary amount of effort and personnel in order to find you and recommend you as a special transfer student. The nameless you, who has no achievements whatsoever, you know? This was the only time that she has ever done something like that — at least, that's what I determined from my reports."

"....."

It was certainly a doubt that he has held all along.

Even the first time when he met Claudia, he asked a little, but Ayato should not have originally been a talented person whose name was well known enough to the extent of being invited as a scholarship student — much less a candidate for being one. Claudia said that she faced quite the opposition pushing his name through and recommended him, but in the first place, how did Claudia find out such Ayato?

".....This is only a guess, but I think that Claudia might have seen you in a nightmare of <Pan-Dora>."

"<Pan-Dora>'s.....? But, I heard from Claudia that almost all of her memories of <Pan-Dora>'s nightmares disappear after she wakes up."

Claudia should have previously stated this.

"It looks like it. But, didn't she say this as well? That, fragments of memories remain. Even if it's just fragments and if it was really something strong enough to change a person, then how about it?"

After these words, Ayato recalled the occasion where he met Claudia for the first time.

『……Finally.....Finally I get to see you.....』

That time when he was suddenly embraced from behind by Claudia in the student council room.

Looking back now, Claudia at that time was completely different from her usual self. Such brittle and frail voice of Claudia, he has heard it only once at that time — since then, he has never heard it again.

“In other words, she met you inside a dream and was attracted to you..... then she came over to this Asterisk in order to meet you and dedicate herself to you. That is what I think is her wish. Well, honestly speaking, I think that it is an absurd and foolish wish though.”

As for Ayato himself, it was a conclusion quite hard to accept; but when looking objectively, she did have a point.

“But then, Claudia doesn’t need to participate in the <Festa>, right.....?”

Assuming that it was as Laetitia said, there was no meaning in taking part in the <Gryps> and going as far as to make enemy of Galaxy.

“Right, that’s it!”

While implying that this was the main point, Laetitia spoke eagerly.

“I only heard half of her wish — so, I think that the remaining half is related to this matter.”

“The remaining half..... Are you saying that it’s about Claudia being connected with Professor Bartsheik and the <Dusk of Jade>?”

But considering that, they did not seem to have any connection at all.

“And so, I would like to ask you, but..... Amagiri Ayato, do you have any idea regarding that?”

“.....Me?”

Of course, there was no way he would.

“Even the professor’s name, I only became aware of it when I heard about it from Claudia.”

Even though he knew it without seeing it, he answered so while shaking his head.

“Really? Aren’t you hiding anything?”

“Yes, I swear.”

“Haa..... is that so.”

It was a crestfallen voice as if to say that her expectations were off.

“But, at any rate, I think that for Claudia, you are without doubt one of the important keys.”

“Well..... that might be so, but”

Though he was not sure yet, if he were to believe Laetitia’s story, he could not deny the possibility.

“In that case, you should first find out Claudia and make her give up her wish by all means. You are the only one who might be able to persuade her, after all.”

“That’s.....”

Ayato was at a loss for words for an instant.

Ayato wondered whether he had the right to make someone give up their wish — and moreover a wish that they wanted to fulfill even after the situation reached this point.

“Even if she were to pull through the ordeal this time, since the Integrated Enterprise Foundation has begun to move, it is impossible for them to stop. Even you understand that, right? In this world, opposing the Integrated Enterprise Foundation is tantamount to death. No matter what kind of wish it is, it should not be something worth exchanging for one’s life.”

One could see from the sincerity of her words that Laetitia was seriously concerned about Claudia.

“.....Yes.”

Therefore, Ayato swept away the doubt in his heart and nodded emphatically.

There might certainly be wishes that one was willing to stake their life on in this world.

Even so — as expected Ayato did not want Claudia to lose her life.

“.....Then, I will believe in you and entrust you with this.”

“This is?”

A small silver amulet was quietly slipped from the chair in the rear seat to Ayato’s sofa.

“It is a charm that was given to me as a present by Claudia before. It seems like it grants good luck..... Haa, really, it is a quite disagreeable present.”

“Disagreeable.....?”

Ayato had no clue at all of what she talked about.

“It’s fine; anyway please give it to her. This is — a little revenge of mine after all.”

*

When Ayato came out of the coffee shop, the early autumn's sun was blocked by thick clouds and it was awfully dusky even though it was noon.

The lukewarm wind carried a unique smell with moisture. As the weather forecast, there might soon be a rainfall.

“.....Anyway, I must first find Claudia.”

While muttering so, he hurried on his way back to the academy.

What were the reasons that made Claudia move like this? Ayato could only ask the person herself, and if he was one of the keys as Laetitia said, Ayato himself had to get to Claudia no matter what.

—Then, Ayato received a call on his portable terminal.

As he hurriedly opened a space window, the face of someone unexpected appeared there.

“Eh? Sylvie?”

『Ayato-kun, I heard about it. It looks like it's somehow became a serious matter.』

“Ah, yes. That's right, but..... from where did you hear about that information?”

『I may look like this, but I am a student council president and we have Benetnasch, which is more or less an excellent Espionage Organization, here.』

I see.

Just like Laetitia and company, though there was a little time lag, each academy's higher-ups seemed to have already grasped this information.

“That’s right! Perhaps, if it’s Benetnasch from your side, I wonder whether they might grasp Claudia’s whereabouts.”

Though he asked so holding on a gleam of hope, Sylvia apologetically shook her head.

『Sorry, Ayato-kun. I didn’t hear up to there, and even if they grasp it, I think that they probably won’t tell me to that extent.』

As expected regarding this situation, even Queen Veil seemed to judge a watchful stance as the best course of action.

They naturally knew about Sylvia and Ayato being friends, and so, there was no way that they would reveal such information to Sylvia.

『But you know, I thought about in my own way, but—』

“.....Huh?”

As Sylvia spoke up to there, the space window suddenly black out with a snapping sound.

“Communication impossible.....?”

The message, which was displayed by the newly opened space window, was not something he saw so often. Aside from if it was a particular place like the underground block where Saya fell in the other day, it should usually be impossible to be unable to communicate in a middle of a town like this.

Ayato, who raised his head while thinking so, was shocked. Before he was aware, the surrounding scenery has completely changed. A Street devoid of people and abandoned buildings about to collapse — it was the Redevelopment Area.

“Wha.....?”

Ayato should have advanced to the direction opposite to the Redevelopment Area's in order to return to Seidoukan Academy. And yet, why was he in such a place? Moreover, as if it was waiting for Ayato to stop, a thick fog rose up from the ground.

It was clearly abnormal.

As Ayato went on his guard, a figure of a person appeared like a ghost from the fog.

“!”

“.....This is a kind of art of seclusion, you see? It interferes with the target's sense of direction. It's quite hard to deal with it if one doesn't notice before it's cast on him.”

To Ayato, who was on guard, that figure said so in an out-of-place, light tone.

“Eh? This voice..... Don't tell me, Yabuki.....!?”

“Yes, correct answer~”

When the figure, who was slowly advancing, finally reached a distance where it could be distinguished, there was the figure of his roommate putting on a hood over his eyes. Though his eyes were hidden, a light smile floated on his lips.

“Why are you in a place like this.....?”

“Now, now, Amagiri. Could you let me hold you here for a while without asking for any reason?”

With both hands in his pockets, Eishiro stopped at the very limit of Ayato's range.

“Hold me?Ah, I see, so that's how it is.”

At Eishiro's way of speaking, Ayato, although vague, guessed the circumstances.

He lightly scowled at Eishiro while smiling wryly.

"In other words..... Yabuki is on the academy's side, huh."

"Hmm, actually I wanted to reveal it grandly in a more elaborate situation, but..... Well, can't be helped, I guess."

As Eishiro took off his hood, he scratched his head with his usual friendly smile.

"You've surely heard about the Shadow Star, right? I'm pretty much a member there. Hehehe, are you surprised?"

".....Well, yes. Of course I'd be surprised if I was suddenly told that a friend of mine is an agent of an Espionage Organization."

"Considering that, you're quite calm."

At Eishiro's pointing out, Ayato answered while putting a hand to his waist.

"It's because I noticed for quite some time ago that Yabuki wasn't an ordinary person. And considering all that, you showed no behavior of taking part in the <Festa>; I found it strange."

"Arara..... looks like I'm still lacking training, eh."

Saying that, Eishiro unnaturally dropped his shoulders as if crestfallen.

"But still, I'm happy that you still consider me as your friend. Though I say it myself, I deceived you, you know?"

Although his head was hung, a cunning glint showed in his eyes.

"Hmm..... I think "hide" would be the right word to use here though. Besides, in that case then there are still one or two things that even I'm

hiding to you, so we're even."

When he said so, Eishiro opened his mouth with a dumbfounded face.

"I already knew it, but there's a limit to be softhearted, you know....."

"That's not it. I'm properly moving with calculation. After all, come on — if it's a friend, then he might let me through here, right?"

Ayato returned to a serious face and squared off once again.

One could feel that the surrounding atmosphere became tense.

"Hey, hey, how scary."

However, Eishiro smoothly warded off the pressure.

"Well, actually, I'm not that reluctant to let you through though."

"Eh?"

"I also have my own circumstances, you see? I don't really like..... or rather, I don't feel in the least inclined to taking on this job."

"Good grief" said Eishiro while shrugging his shoulders.

".....I'll ask just in case, but does the Shadow Star allow such a casual attitude towards work?"

It was an Espionage Organization after all.

"Hahaha, it obviously doesn't. Not that I want to boast, but as a problem child since the Shadow Star's establishment, I'm fairly well-known in that world, you know?"

".....It really isn't something to boast about."

Even at such a time, Eishiro did not feel tense at all.

“You know, aside from if it’s something that I myself want to do, I hate being unreasonably forced to do a job I don’t want to. And well, the job this time is exactly that.”

“Then this means that you’ll obediently let me through, right?”

When Ayato said so, Eishiro broadly grinned.

“But, assuming that you went past here. Do you have any idea where the Pres. is?”

“That’s..... not yet.”

Though he was irritated to that fact, he could not help but recognize it.

“There’s no way you’ll find her by searching randomly. After all, the ones chasing after the Pres. are those guys.”

“Those.....? No, more importantly, perhaps do you know something about Claudia’s whereabouts, Yabuki?”

“Hmm, it’d be a lie if I said that I don’t.”

Eishiro plainly said so.

“In that case—”

But, so as to hold back Ayato in high spirits before the latter could finish his sentence, Eishiro stuck out his right arm.

“No, no, as expected if I were to reveal it, I’d find myself in a bad situation. No matter how you look at it, it’ll be dangerous.”

“Yabuki, Claudia is in danger of life, you know?! Please!”

Ayato desperately begged him.

“Well, I’m also quite indebted to the Pres., and there is a mountain of things

I want to repay her for, but..... Ah, then how about we do this?"

Then, Eishiro clapped his hands as if he had just thought of a good idea.

"—Amagiri, have a bout with me."

"A bout.....?"

Ayato wondered what he would suddenly start talking about, but judging from this situation, it looked like Eishiro intended to lead the talk up to here from the beginning.

"If you win, I'll tell you the Pres' whereabouts. Also, if I lost, it'd work well as an excuse to make to the top brass. And above all..... I've wanted to play a little with you for a long time now."

"No, I don't have such a time.....!"

"Then, forget it."

"Kuh.....!"

Though Eishiro revealed his usual frivolous smile, his eyes were serious. It was not a lie, and Ayato understood too well that he would probably make no concession.

"Haa..... I got it. So, what kind of bout will we have?"

It looked like he could do nothing but take on that bout here.

"Let's see..... I don't intend to have a bout of life and death, so how about a bout with bare hands without weapons? It's your win if you bring me down."

"What about your victory condition?"

"I should originally just hold you back here, so it wouldn't count as a clear win. If anything, the more it drags on, the closer will it be to my win."

It looked like he was skillfully made to take the bet, but it could not be helped at this late hour.

“As for the field..... Ah, we’ll do with the abandoned building over there.”

Eishiro looked around and pointed at a nearby abandoned building. The height was a four-storey building, but the top floor part’s walls and ceiling greatly crumbled. It was a common abandoned building which you would find anywhere in the Redevelopment Area.

“Got it. My bad, but I’ll go at it seriously.”

“Fine by me. But, don’t take me too lightly.”

As he said so, Eishiro’s figure melted once again and disappeared inside the fog.

“Well then.....”

Ayato calmly released his seal and set foot inside the abandoned building.

*

“Huh.....? It’s strange.”

Queen Veil Girl’s Academy, Twin Hall Top Floor — in the corridor, Sylvia cocked her head in puzzlement while fiddling with her portable terminal.

Even though she could normally communicate with it until just a while ago, the communication suddenly became impossible. She thought that it might have been broken, but even so it was too sudden.

As for searching for the cause, it wasn’t like Sylvia was unfamiliar with machines, but she did not know a lot about them, either. As she was trying this and that which came into her mind for the time being—

“.....Whom were you speaking with, Sylvia?”

“Uwah! Petra, san.....”

When she turned around as she felt someone's presence, Queen Veil Girl's Academy's board chairman, Petra Kivilehto was walking towards her.

“No, it's nothing, it's nothing..... Ah, it's no use after all, huh.”

She hurriedly hid her portable terminal at her back..... But guessing that she could not talk her way out of this situation no matter what, Sylvia resigned herself and assumed a serious attitude.

“I was speaking with Ayato-kun. Is it bad?”

“Haa..... I told you many times not to poke your nose into this matter, right? No matter if you are the world diva, you surely know what will happen if you go against W&W's intention, don't you?Even I wouldn't be able to protect you.”

“I..... Know that, but”

“Then, quietly follow my advice.”

Sylvia reluctantly put her portable terminal into her pocket.

She wanted to help Ayato if possible, but unfortunately, there was practically nothing that she could do regarding this matter.

“Still, the intention of the great Integrated Enterprise Foundation, huh.....”

“What do you want to say?”

To Sylvia's teasing way of speaking, one could see that Petra's expression stiffened behind the visor glass.

“Nothing really. Just that I don't find it funny.”

Seidoukan student council president's life was aimed at by the intention of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, and when she thought that the other

Integrated Enterprise Foundations moved in an attempt to stop it, now they calmly decided to keep a watchful stance letting her die without interfering as soon as the situation changed. As though to say that both sides should just fall down.

“Every last one of them is selfish.....”

When Sylvia cursed as such, Petra said with a sigh.

“You are still young, Sylvia. It’s not just limited to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation; when one thinks that they might obtain greater benefits in a more efficient way, it’s natural for them to be selfish. And in this current world, it’s not regarded as being bad.”

“I wonder about that..... I think I’m different though.”

Sylvia muttered as if to persuade herself.

In the end, she felt like she was again made to realize that the students of Asterisk were only pawns in order to provide profit for them (IEF).

Even if like Sylvia, some could gain more freedom than ordinary students, that did not change the fact that the cage was just a bit bigger and they could go out of it.

“.....Do you know, Petra-san? This made me realize once again that it’s no more than a mere show, you know?”

“Throw away such trivial sentiments, Sylvia. Didn’t you choose yourself to become an idol?”

“That’s true, but..... it isn’t something so easy to decide. Even you were a student of this academy, so you understand, right, Petra-san?”

When Sylvia said so, Petra, after keeping silent for a while, answered in a voice with a somewhat muffled tone.

“.....I have forgotten about them, such old days.”

—What an obvious lie.

Sylvia did not voice it out as she just stopped at muttering so in her heart.

She understood that there was no point in teasing Petra any further. Venting one's anger was unsightly, and it would make her feel even more miserable.

“Ayato-kun..... Do your best.”

Therefore at least, Sylvia prayed for the safety of the person who was going to fight with his helpless power.

*

As a matter of fact, inside of the abandoned building was dim and moreover, because fog also went inside, one could hardly see far ahead.

Ayato immediately noticed the sense of incongruity as he was carefully advancing.

(The state of “cognition” doesn't work.....?)

Perhaps because this was also the effect of the art of seclusion, the effect of the state of “cognition”, which was the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style's perception expansion technique, did not work as he expected.

“I didn't see this coming.....”

However, there was no point in grieving over something that was not usable.

When he looked around the dimly inside through the fog, the first floor seemed to be an empty hall. He could grasp stairs, which apparently led to the second, at the back and a partially destroyed door, which looked like it would collapse at any moment, on the wall surface on the side.

Relying only on the weak light coming in through a broken window, immediately after he went into the hall, where debris were scattered, something flew towards Ayato.

“Oops.....!”

As Ayato tried to catch it, it was a lump long and narrow iron — the so-called bo shuriken.

“.....Eishiro, wasn’t it a barehanded bout?”

As he raised such a voice to the other side of the fog while being slightly amazed, a reply returned immediately.

“Of course it is. But unfortunately, it seems like traps were set here and there in this abandoned building. Dear me, I don’t know who on earth did it, but it sure is dangerous, yup. You should be careful, too.”

“What a transparent lie.....”

Although, it was no use complaining at this late hour. He could only proceed very carefully.

Though it was a situation where it was hard to see even his steps, he advanced little by little while paying attention to the maximum.

About when he arrived until the center of the hall before long, truly abruptly, blood lust suddenly appeared behind him without any previous notice at all.

“Kuh!”

When he suddenly evaded by rolling forward, Eishiro’s sharp hand sword[3] cut thin air by a hairbreadth.

“Arara, it was avoided. You’re good as expected, Amagiri. You aren’t the <Phoenix> winner just for show, eh.”

Eishiro laughed somewhat lightheartedly.

“You too, I didn’t feel your presence at all..... what kind of trick is it?”

“Well, this kind of attack under cover of darkness is our specialty after all. If it could be easily seen through, that would put me in an awkward position.”

While saying so, Eishiro’s body once again became blurred in the fog and the very dim light.

“Moreover, this place currently is completely under control of my technique. You can’t use your state of “cognition”, right?”

“As I thought, you did something, huh..... or rather, from the fact that you said technique, are you <Dante>, Yabuki?”

While being cautious of the surroundings, he continued the conversation so as to draw out information even if a little.

“In a wide meaning, you could say that; but well it’s something like World Dragon’s Star Senjutsu. Though unlike them, it’s a technique only my clan can use.”

“Clan?”

“My home has such an occupation since long ago. I was already training in various ways since I was a child. My father adopts the train of thought that someone with no talent should just die, so he showed no mercy at all. Really, how many times do you think I ran away from home.....?”

The voice could be heard from the right front. The moment when Ayato turned his attention and consciousness there—

“Wha!?”

A low roundhouse kick from the side swept at Ayato's leg.

A complete surprise attack. Even so, as he forcibly twisted his body and put his right hand on the floor, he escaped from pursuit with the trick of back flip.

“Hahaha, you'd better be careful, Amagiri. Tricking someone with the source of a voice is a basics of basics for us.”

Such a voice was heard from overheard.

“.....Thanks for the advice.”

As of now, Ayato finally realized it.

—Yabuki Eishiro was strong.

Although he used preliminary arrangements and locational advantage, the sharpness of his attacks and his carriage were first class levels. He would not be inferior even if compared with a <Page One>.

Fortunately for Ayato, Eishiro did not devote himself to escape and rather assertively came out to attack.

If he were to believe Eishiro's words as is, gaining time should be his goal. In that case, it would be much more effective to only hide himself.

(Or, does he have another purpose.....? No, it's no use thinking about it now.)

Ayato fixed his breathing and concentrated his nerves.

No matter how much one erased their presence, blood lust would leak out at the moment of the attack. In that case, what was left was to wonder how fast he could react to it.

He calmed his heart, and circulated prana until every corner of his body.

And.

“.....Got you!”

“!”

Ayato just barely evaded the gouging-like hand sword that was once again lunged from behind. His flank was torn and a dull pain ran through there, but he had no room to mind it.

While Ayato rotated his body to the side, he drove in a backhand chop to Eishiro’s chest using that momentum.

“Oops!”

Eishiro deflected the trajectory by repelling the blow with a fist and then immediately returned a sokutou kick[4]. Ayato blocked it by crossing both his hands and then released a palm strike with his left hand while sweeping the kick foot with his right hand.

Fist and fist, and kick and kick clashed with each other; and a hard sound echoed in the hall of the abandoned building shrouded in mist.

An even offense and defense like a Kumite[5] was proof that both parties’ abilities rivaled each other.

Though Ayato was patiently looking for an opening of Eishiro, he finally found it when Eishiro released a kick with large swing.

“.....There!”

“Wow!?”

—But.

(There’s..... no reaction!?)

Even though it should have been a perfectly good timing, Ayato's fist cut through empty air.

No, more precisely only Eishiro's jacket remained there, and the figure of Eishiro himself was not there.

"Substitute technique.....!?"

"Hehehe, naïve, naïve!"

The next moment, a flurry of blows seeking out their targets was driven in from inside the fog as if drifting to Ayato's temple, solar plexus and inner thigh.

"Guh.....!"

Although he raised his defensive power with prana, damages of attacks to vital parts were great. Moreover, Eishiro's blows splendidly transformed prana into offensive power like World Dragon's fist warriors. Though it was not something difficult as a technique, suitable training was necessary in order to smoothly perform this.

Even so, Ayato did not stop and released a roundhouse kick towards the direction where he was attacked.

"!"

There was a response, but he could tell that he was guarded judging from the sensation. The presence which arose there for an instant immediately disappeared again.

"Phew..... You've quite a good intuition, eh. Looks like I should proceed a little more carefully."

Eishiro's voice was once again heard out of nowhere.

(Carefully.....?)

Ayato wondered on earth what kind of move he would set next.

As he stood ready by lowering his waist so as to cope with any attack, he suddenly heard a strange sound. It was a weird sound, as if something cracked.

He surveyed the surroundings, but there was not particularly anything strange in the visible range.

(No..... Wait! Wrong!)

“.....Above!”

It was almost at the same time when Ayato unintentionally shouted so that spiderweb-like cracks ran in length and breadth to the ceiling and collapsed.

While debris of various sizes poured down like rain, he ran through the hall while evading only debris of size that could crush a person. Though debris of fist size struck his body, he could not afford to mind it.

If he arrived until the stairs, he should be able to somehow manage for the time being — but just before he reached there, Ayato’s sharpened perception felt the sign that a trap activated.

Bo shurikens were shot from tree directions towards Ayato. The way and angle, how they sandwiched Ayato, would not be established unless Ayato stepped into this direction from this place.

In other words.....

(The debris a prior move in order to lead me here, huh.....!)

It restricted the route with debris of various sizes that fell and forced Ayato into the trap. He no longer had any choice other than to admire the meticulousness of the setup.

“.....Kuh!”

Because he could hardly evade the bo shurikens that came flying, he could only guard by concentrating prana in both his arms. Though the damages were not that much, as expected he was made to stop.

—That instant, blood lust rose up behind Ayato.

“It’s over, Amagiri.”

Eishiro’s voice, which was convinced of his victory, yet cold and calm without the slightest carelessness, resounded into his ear.

In fact, it would be just as he said.

If Ayato could not predict it, that is.

“Wha.....!?”

Eishiro’s face was distorted in shock.

This was because when Eishiro appeared behind Ayato, he had already begun the motion of an attack while turning around.

His right hand’s palm strike struck Eishiro’s chin and at the same time he (Ayato) drove in an elbow strike into his (Eishiro) chest. Furthermore, he drove in three consecutive blows into Eishiro’s solar plexus with his left fist.

“Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Grappling Technique— “Lightning carrier (Mikazuchi)””

“Gahah!”

Eishiro, who directly received them, collapsed pitching forward with eyes wide opened.

“Are you all right, Yabuki?”

When Ayato called out to him, Eishiro somehow turned his body to look upwards while raising a painful voice.

“Owww..... Haa, it’s my complete defeat.”

An ounce of blood lust of earlier could no longer be felt from Eishiro who said so. Rather, he felt somehow refreshed and even revealed a relieved smile.

“Tell me one thing, how did you read my attack in that situation?”

“Well, if I’ve to say, it was just intuition, but.....”

“But?”

“Even the two times before, Eishiro came attacking from my back, right? That’s why, I thought that maybe you’d do the same thing this time, too.”

To these words of Ayato, Eishiro slapped his forehead.

“Kaah~, so that’s it.....! I failed!”

Though he said it lightly, it looked like he was really frustrated from the bottom of his heart.

“I’ll tell you just in case, but normally, I’d have brought you down with the first move, so such guess would have been of no use.”

“What a dangerous pride..... or rather, it’s an excuse, isn’t it?”

After coming so far, he wondered whether he should be amazed or impressed.

“By the way, something’s been bothering me a little.”

“Hmm?”

“Just now, was it Yabuki going all out? For some reason, it didn’t really feel

like that to me though."

"That's not true, I went all out."

Though Eishiro laughed as he said so, it was a fact that Ayato did not feel his bottom.

But, now was not the time to mind such a thing.

"So Yabuki, Where is Claudia?"

"Ah, that's right. The Pres.'s whereabouts..... she's in the harbor block of the academy."

As he promised, Eishiro easily told him about it.

"When you say the harbor block, do you that place at the outer edge of the academy?"

Although the harbor block, which spread by surrounding Seidoukan Academy, was more or less a site of Seidoukan, it was normally impossible for students to enter there. It was an area for mainly storing supplies and, if one had to say it, it was almost like a warehouse town.

"Judging from the people who attacked the pres., the worst will be to escape to the urban area. As expected, it would be difficult to destroy the evidence there even for Galaxy. Still, although now the period of the <Festa> and holiday, it would stand out too much to try to dispose of her within the academy. The most convenient place to drive her away is only that place."

While grimacing in pain, Eishiro got up.

"I see....."

Now that Ayato knew that, he could stay here like this.

"Eishiro, I....."

"Yes, I'm all right, so don't worry. More importantly, if you seriously go to save Claudia, you should worry about yourself."

Eishiro said so and turned a wry smile to Ayato.

"The ones attacking the pres. now are Galaxy's active corps, the "Knight Emmitt"..... They were once called Yabuki Clan."

"Yabuki.....?"

Which means, no way.....

"Yes — the one leading them is my father."

Translator and references notes

[1] the Japanese expression used here is 獅子身中の虫, which means 'snake in one's bosom' or 'parasite in a lion' or 'bite the hand that feeds you'; basically it means to be a traitor within one's camp, something like that

[2] meaning here that it can't be used as a heirloom of a family, lol

[3]手刀, I translate it as hand sword, but it actually means hand used like a sword in striking. Will use hand sword also below

[4]足刀蹴り, I just left it as sokutou kick, because I don't know how to translate in English. Basically, it's a kick with the outer edge of the foot (from little toe to heel). Look examples here: https://www.google.fr/search?q=%E8%B6%B3%E5%88%80%E8%B9%B4%E3%82%8A&biw=1280&bih=887&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjz4_2jtfNAhVQnRQKHZo4CCIQsAQIKQ&dpr=1

[5]組み手, for the meaning, read here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kumite>

Chapter 5 – Midday

“...HAA!”

After Claudia warded off the dagger of a Kinoe with her right hand's blade, she slashed horizontally with the blade in her left hand.

“—”

The Kinoe silently fell on the ground in a pool of quickly spreading blood.

Though the wound was not severe enough to claim his life, it was still enough so that he could not immediately continue chasing after her.

Claudia immediately turned on her heels and started running to the inner part of the warehouse town. The uniform she wore was torn here and there and was stained with blood; but fortunately all caused by minor injuries.

It had started raining from the overcast sky a while ago, and in the weather forecast, it was predicted that this rain would not let up at all.

While avoiding cameras located at regular intervals, she hid herself for the time being in a dome-like large warehouse, where huge containers were orderly stacked. As a figure like unmanned transportation was just carrying containers right now, it was fortunate that the entrance was opened — of course, Claudia knew of that timing though.

In the harbor area of the urban area, due the employment adjustment of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, there were in fact many workers; but as for the academy's harbor block, full automation was thoroughly enforced.

“Phew..... It's quite tough as expected.”

As Claudia spoke to herself, she leaned her back on a container and took a deep and long breath.

After all, she had been running for nearly half a day since the attack at dawn. Although she had been expecting it, the fatigue had started to catch up to her.

The Yabuki Clan — as expected of a Combat Corps under Galaxy's direct control. The fact that Claudia had been able to escape to a safe place like this now was solely thanks to her previous preparations and <Pan-Dora>'s future foresight.

But at this rate, she did not know how long she would hold.

"The communication is..... as expected not usable, huh."

Claudia took out her portable terminal and, after operating it several times, returned it to her breast pocket.

The Yabuki Clan had special skills which only those of their lineage could use.

Moreover, they (skills) were only troublesome ones like putting up a barrier to ward off people or intercepting sounds and electromagnetic waves. The most terrifying thing above all was the point that their techniques consumed nearly no mana and prana. And given this, unlike the abilities of <Strega> and <Dante>, it was extremely difficult to sense them.

"However, the situation itself is generally as I expected....."

As she tightly gripped the twin swords in her hands, Claudia smiled wryly.

A little more.

Just a little more and Claudia's wish would come true.

The only dream that Claudia Enfield held.

The selfish wish of a person that probably no one would understand.

Her hands were about to reach there.

“.....For that reason, I can’t afford to die in such a place.”

Assuming that it was natural for Claudia herself to give her all, what was left was to what extent the plans which overlapped even over and over again would bear fruit.

After all, that Yabuki Clan and its present Head Yabuki Bujinsai that had history of several hundred years.

It might be said that there was no higher predicament than this in Claudia’s life.

And yet, Claudia could not stop twisting her lips naturally.

It was not her usual perfect smile, but a more pure one—

“!”

The next moment, Claudia jumped onto a container.

Shurikens stuck into the container consecutively as to chase her, but Claudia’s movement was one step ahead.

While running over the container with all her strength, Claudia sounded out the number of her pursuers moving soundlessly like shadows.

Judging from the Kinoes’ ability, she would not suffer a defeat if it was a one-on-one; but a two-on-one was slightly dangerous and in the case of a three-on-one, an escape was recommended.

“One, two, three..... and four people, huh..... This is what is called “The Thirty-Six Stratagems”[1], I guess.”

As Claudia muttered so, she jumped out of the warehouse and ran at full

speed within the rain.

Though she could somehow manage if she used <Pan-Dora>'s future foresight, she wanted to save that ability not to attack, but to survive to the best of her ability.

In that case, she could only keep running away for now.

*

“—”

“Hmm, it's much more troublesome than I expected.”

When Bujinsai received report from one of the Kinoes in a low voice which could not be heard, he looked down at the harbor block, which spread from over a huge crane, below.

The gray scenery which was hazy in the rain looked as gloomy as a graveyard.

“As expected, having failed with the first move came biting back at us, huh..... even though I warned him so much to stay out of it; that stupid son of mine.”

While stroking his chin, Bujinsai grumbled so with a sigh. There was no mistaking that information leaked from Eishiro to the target.

“To think that he would go against me to this extent..... Geez, it's frustrating. If he wasn't quick-witted, I'd have given up on him long ago.”

The Shadow Star including Eishiro was currently playing the role of backup to Bujinsai. But judging from these circumstances, it was doubtful to what extent Eishiro would follow his will.

In the first place, the Yabuki Clan's specialty was information gathering and

assassination, not military oppression. At the point when they failed the assassination in the room, it might be said to be an unbecoming failure.

However, even if the opponent was rank #2, she was just one student after all. Though they by no means took her lightly, he never thought that they would fail to catch until now.

Although it was all right until they cornered her in this harbor block, thinking about it now, it was somehow strange, too. The target was too well-informed about this area.

Though this harbor block was not originally a place where people could thoughtlessly enter, moreover a barrier to prevent people from entering was currently put up. The variously spread out surveillance cameras had been taken over as well. One might say that there was no field more suitable than this to hunt someone down.

Despite this, the target, as if she knew the placement of every single surveillance camera, had not been caught even once by the net.

There was no hesitation at all in choosing her escape route; it was as if it was the garden of her house.

No matter if she was the president, it might be said that it was originally impossible for a student to be so familiar with the harbor block that was unrelated to students.

(Could it be that we were the ones who were lured in here.....?)

In addition, the target's combat ability was more difficult than expected, too.

Even more than her basic specs, as she could use <Pan-Dora>'s future foresight so freely, it was certainly difficult to bring her down.

But even when taking all of these into consideration, according to Bujinsai's

reading, they should have been able to corner the target at an earlier stage. In other words, it was very likely that in the present condition, another factor was mixed in.

“What are those guys, who went around to the south, doing? Also, the ones I sent for scouting are slightly late in coming back.”

“We’ve lost contact with them since a little while now.....”

“!”

At that moment, Bujinsai greatly leaped back. At the same time, the Kinoe who was beside him substituted so as to protect Bujinsai. That Kinoe received a kick of someone, who suddenly came jumping, and was knocked down from the crane without being able to use a technique.

“.....”

The one who attacked violently without making a sound or revealing her presence was a woman wearing an eerie mask.

When the woman softly landed on the tip of the crane, she silently faced Bujinsai.

“Hmm, that mask..... you’re the brat of World Dragon, huh.”

While narrowing his eyes, Bujinsai slowly stroked his chin.

“Although it’s the harbor block, this place is Seidoukan’s site. To think that you’d creep in here, you’re quite daring, <Seiten Taisei>.”

『.....What, I was easily found out after all, huh.』

Then instead of the voice, a space window opened and these lines were displayed there; that woman —Arema Seiyaan removed her mask modeling on the design of wolf and revealed a complacent smile.

“To think a former rank #1 is now enthralled by such behind-the-scenes jobs..... how pitiable of you, *<Divine Revelations>*’s dog.”

『You’ve quite the wicked tongue, old man. Looks like the saying “a human will become mellow as he grows old” is a lie, huh.』

Not shaken by Bujinsai’s provocation, Arema laughed quite indifferently.

(.....Hmph, she didn’t take the bait, huh.)



As expected of a person who had the seat of the strongest in World Dragon until the current <Divine Revelations> appeared; she had quite the guts.

“But is it fine with you? Your action is clear violation of the Stella Carta. Should this be exposed, even World Dragon wouldn’t get out of it unscathed, you know?”

In the Stella Carta, students were strictly prohibited to enter the site of other academies without permission. Though judging from the security side, the intrusion itself was actually not difficult in any places other than the central part. All the more if it was an agent of The Espionage Organization that each academy had.

Even so, the reason why each academy faithfully abided by it was because information war heated up too much once at the Asterisk dawn period and confusion which affected the show of the <Festa> occurred. From the reflection of these events, each academy generally abided to these rules even now and it became a convention to prepare a betrayer into other academies even when they wanted to start something.

Assuming an agent of another academy intruded within the site, he would not escape from being inflicted a heavy punishment with that alone.

“Moreover, there’s nothing that you guys of World Dragon would obtain no matter how you move.”

『Kakaka! What are you saying at this late hour?』

However, Arema laughed down such words of Bujinsai.

『We the “Glaring Eye”, unlike the cowards of elsewhere, have nothing to do with either the Integrated Enterprise Foundation’s profit or the loss and gain of the academy. If <Divine Revelations> decided so, we’re only her hands

and feet that merely executed her orders. Isn't it the same for you guys, huh? We're what are called Pros, right?』

“.....Hmm, a brat like you dares to boast, huh.”

Bujinsai revealed a complacent smile while saying so.

“Still, you're more promising than my son, I guess.”

『Honestly, I'm disappointed in you guys. It's like you are lacking in consistency; or should I say, a disappointment is fine as well, I guess.』

“I see, so it was you who went around crushing my subordinates, huh.”

Speaking of Arema Seiyaan, she was World Dragon Seventh Institute's former rank #1.

Unlike the major company PMC and the Integrated Enterprise Foundation military authorities' elite forces that gathered only graduates of superior ranks, the Yabuki Clan was a group that radicalized special techniques by lineage, and looking only at the individual fighting strength, it was not strange for Arema to surpass them.

But even if one said so, they should not have been weak enough as to have been so easily defeated by one person.

“.....Well whatever. At any rate, I no longer have any time to spare against you alone, you see?”

At the same time as Bujinsai said so, multiple shadows standing in a row on the crane appeared.

Many-on-one in this place with bad footing. It was an overwhelming advantageous situation.

『What, I've heard that the Yabuki Clan has gathered a small number of

elites, and yet there's so many people remaining..... huh~?』

Arema, who was amazed, suddenly tilted her head to the side.

『It's really strange. You over there, you of the other side..... also you of this side as well; a moment ago, I'm sure I should have strangled you to death though.』

There were four Kinoes surrounding Arema. All of them had the same attire and one could not distinguish their faces. Of course, although there was a difference in stature, her insight to see through them as such at a glance was as expected quite something.

“Our people are all sturdy, you see?”

Whether it was when Bujinsai finished or did not finish saying so, the four Kinoes moved simultaneously. A simultaneous attack from all directions without concern of their bodies — it was the same pattern as when they caught Eishiro yesterday.

『……Hmph!』

—But.

Arema dealt with these simultaneous attacks with divine feat-like movements.

She jumped from the right crane and warded off the black blade that slashed towards her with her right hand, while simultaneously twisting her body and catching the bo shuriken thrown from the left crane with the fingers of her left hand. Then, she tripped up the Kinoe who charged at her from the front with a raised fist before repelling a kick from behind with the elbow of her left arm.

The actions that would not have worked had the timing been just a little bit

off, Arema pulled them off while revealing a smile filled with joy.

And when she pulled through the first blow, the Kinoes were no longer opponents for Arema.

The Kinoe, who attacked from the front, danced in the air as he received a palm stroke which raised his chin, the Kinoe who attacked from the right was kicked flying as his body became stiff after receiving a finger tip on his neck's pressure point and flung against the next crane.

Furthermore, Arema, who greatly leapt by the recoil of the kick threw back the bo shuriken in the air without even turning her gaze there, thus defeating the Kinoe on the left crane. When she landed behind the remaining Kinoe, she easily dodged his attack which met with her backhand chop and struck his abdomen with both her hands. Immediately after, an intense shock ran throughout his body and the Kinoe fell over from the crane.

“Hmm, not bad.”

Bujinsai was honestly impressed after seeing that series of offenses and defenses.

Arema’s martial arts which was polished up to a frightening degree deserved pure praise.

『Compared to XingLu-chan, you guys’ movements might as well be considered motionless.』[2]

The breathing Arema, who stated as such, was not disturbed even a little.

『Now then, I’m tired of all these appetizers. I guess I should now move on to the main dish.』

Arema’s eyes were turned to Bujinsai as they glittered ferociously.

Bujinsai scratched his head while receiving it with a bored look.

“.....You’re certainly strong. There’s no doubt about it. But, don’t look down on adults too much, brat.”

『Heeh, then what will you do?』

Arema smirked and slowly took a stance.

“—I shall slightly educate you. You should be thankful.”

Bujinsai beckoned a palm towards such Arema.

*

“Haa..... I wonder if Arema is doing well.....”

HuFeng said so while looking at the pouring rain in a corridor of the Yellow Dragon Temple.

“Hou, so you’re worried about her; that’s rare.”

XingLu, who was walking in front, stopped and innocently laughed while turning only her face.

“It’s not her I’m worried about, but this academy! Do you really understand, Master? If Arema were to fail and leave some kind of evidence..... no, it’d be better in that case; but if things go wrong and she is captured by Seidoukan, it’ll become a great issue, you know?”

“Hohoho, you’re quite the worrywart, huh. They’re doing something underhanded over there, so even assuming that something happened, they won’t make it public so easily. Besides—”

As XingLu said up to there, she continued after moving her gaze towards the cloudy sky.

“Even I acknowledge that girl’s ability. Speaking only of Taijutsu, she doesn’t fall behind Xiao Fay.”

“That..... I am aware of it.”

HuFeng bit his lips while enduring his frustration.

This meant in other words that she was valued more highly than HuFeng.

Arema’s Taijutsu was a self-taught one that took in techniques of various schools and continued evolving even now. It was not the result of Arema’s hunger for strength, but the one of hunger for the fighting itself.

That anecdote that she once was a dojo challenger and challenged every faction in World Dragon and got victory every time was not just for show. Although she did not participate in <Festas>, she still kept within the top 10 in the ranking of the『Hex Pantheon』. The ranking of the『Hex Pantheon』 was popular along with ability — in other words, because exposure greatly influenced it, it was simply astounding that Arema could maintain this ranking even now when she carried out her behind-the-scenes works.

“Then, are you saying that we may feel relieved regarding this matter?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Huh?”

“I’m sad to say, since that girl is an idiot, so she’ll probably challenge the Head of Yabuki head on.”

XingLu said so and began to walk again.

HuFeng, who was about to get left behind, hurriedly followed after her.

“P-Please, wait a minute, Master! Are you saying Arema has no chance of winning against that Head?”

“I don’t say that. There’s just a small possibility.”

XingLu carefully talked while walking.

“Just that.....the Yabuki Clan is, like Fuyuka’s clan[3], composed of people who inherit an unique lineage from generation to generation. The one, who draws out the most power from the blood among them, is chosen as the Head. Power of blood means close affinity with the techniques that those guys used. I don’t know how strong the current Head is, but at least it’s a fact that Arema has a bad affinity with those guys’ techniques.”

“.....Despite knowing it, you still sent Arema?”

Suddenly, an intense pressure that was released by XingLu pushed down on HuFeng.

“—!”

HuFeng was swallowed by that pressure and he was even unable to breathe for a moment.

“.....Of course. No matter what the results, that girl will become stronger again with this.”

And when XingLu turned to HuFeng, she glared at him with eyes looking like they would shoot a person to death.

“Listen HuFeng, don’t forget it. The reason why I, *<Divine Revelations>*, am here is to train you students of World Dragon. That girl isn’t my disciple, but she’s promising. So, know that I don’t mind using any means.”

“.....As you will. I am sorry.”

As HuFeng whispered an apology, the pressure immediately dispersed like mist.

"Well at any rate, if Arema and the Head were to fight, it wouldn't drag on."

XingLu muttered to herself while looking towards the rain cloud covering up the sky.

"Who knows, it might have already been settled about this time."

*

The rain was gradually increasing in intensity.

"Good grief, I wonder if this old body will endure this autumn rain."

While hearing the voice of Bujinsai, who wiped the dew as he said so, Arema frowned at the coldness of the raindrops hitting her face and the acute pain running throughout her body. Even so, she somehow tore off her body from the wall of the warehouse dented into the crater.

"Hou, you can still stand? It seems like you're much sturdier than us."

Bujinsai stroked his chin with a face as he was truly impressed.

A staff type lux was grasped in his right hand. It was a special lux in which only the circular-shaped part of the head was formed with a blade of light, and a metal-made flying ring was stuck through there. It was a lux that even Arema saw for the first time and it was hard to say that it was very practical.

But, Arema has been one-sided beaten without being able to do anything at all against it.

(Geez, what a terrifying old man.....!)

She fixed her breathing and called forth her remaining prana. The pain faded and she felt prana filling her power until every corner of her body.

It's all right. I can still fight.

The moment when she confirmed it, delight welled up inside Arema.

That's right. Just that alone was enough. Winning or losing was secondary. Fight, fight and fight. Because doing nothing but fighting on was what Arema lived for.

"To think that you'd laugh in this situation, do you have some screws loose, too? How troublesome."

Without answering it, Arema instantly shortened the distance to Bujinsai.

She launched finger thrust aiming for his throat — but, it did not hit. Fist strike, palm stroke, elbow strike, axe blade kick (heartless reversal) and two rising kick (two times reversal); she continued her attacks without pause, but they did not give even a scratch to Bujinsai. Originally, the attacks with timing looking like they would surely catch him were all off the mark.

And on the contrary, for some reason she could not avoid attacks that she should have certainly dodged.

"Well, I guess I shall end it soon."

This time again, a slash that Arema should have perfectly warded off cut at her neck.

Though she stopped it with her hand, it would have reached the artery if it was a little deeper.

However, at that opening Bujinsai's kick gouged at Arema's solar plexus and moreover Bujinsai's tips of the toes mercilessly kicked up the chin of Arema, who could not help falling to her knees.

As expected this was severe, so Arema, who was sent flying, fell down on the floor face up.

"Even you, <Seiten Taisei>, will no longer be able to stand up with this."

Bujinsai, who looked down at Arema with cold eyes, indifferently said so.

『……I want to ask one thing, but is this the so-called ninjutsu that you guys use?』

Still lying down as is, Arema asked Bujinsai.

Honestly speaking, Arema did not think that there was that much gap between her Taijutsu and Bujinsai's.

At least, she did not feel a difference of strength to the point of despair just like when she fought XingLu. And yet, since she has been beaten up so one-sidedly, there should be some different factor.

“Who knows”

Naturally, Bujinsai did not answer; but he curled his lips as he suddenly remembered something.

“Well, there’s no way a greenhorn like you, who is handled by the current Fan XingLu as opponent, will see through it.”

『The current.....?』

“My great-grandfather having fought that You Tian[4] is a story of the old century, but they were originally existences that increased their power by longevity. The height of stupidity that is expressly changing their bodies only harms their strength under their own eyes.”

Bujinsai continued as he sneered.

“Compared to the time when she fought against my great-grandfather, she currently doesn’t possess even half of the power she had then”

(Half—!?)

These words were a shock for Arema.

At the same time, she could feel an indescribable exaltation overflowing from within her.

『Kuku..... Ahahaha! Ahahahaha!』

Still lying down face up as is, she suddenly burst into laughter — although saying that, her voice did not come out though —Bujinsai knitted his brows suspiciously at Arema.

“What’s wrong, brat? Have you finally broken completely?”

『No, well it’s just that I was once again made to realize how wide the world is. So, I can’t afford to die yet in such a place!』

Arema launched a sudden kick at Bujinsai while doing a kip-up, but it was easily dodged.

But, that was fine.

“Hmm.....!”

As Bujinsai stepped back as to take distance, Arema ran up until above the crane using the warehouse’s wall as foothold.

“.....Hou, so you still have such remaining strength, huh.”

Bujinsai muttered as he was amazed from the bottom of his heart.

『My bad, but I more or less completed my task, so with this I’ll fall back for today.』

The task she was ordered by XingLu was to support so that the Seidoukan Academy student council president could escape. Although that in itself was hard to describe as an achievement, she drove away and immobilized the majority of the Yabuki Clan’s assassins. It might be said to be enough

accomplishment.

Though the most troublesome opponent remained, it could not be helped.

“You completed your task, huh. As expected, you’re still quite inexperienced.”

However when Bujinsai said so, he softly lifted one hand.

(!?)

Then behind Bujinsai, the figures of several people appearing to be from the Yabuki Clan appeared as if oozing from the shadow.

Furthermore, similar shadows appeared around above the crane so as to surround Arema.

(Are those reinforcements.....? No, wrong.....!)

The majority of them were people that Arema should certainly have defeated. Although she had no leisure to finish off either of them, on the other hand it was not a slight wound to the extent that they would immediately move, either.

In that case.

『……What a blunder, so there was a healing ability user, huh.』

Arema’s eyes caught a long-haired figure standing behind Bujinsai. Though her outfit from the neck to the bottom was certainly similar to the others’, the silhouette did not cover her head just like Bujinsai. Arema could immediately grasp that only she was clearly inferior in strength compared to the others.

The reason why such a person was taken along could be none other than for support personnel. When comparing with the present situation, it would be

proper to regard her as having the recovery role.

However, there was not a healing ability user with power enough to allow this many severely wounded people to immediately return on the front even in a medical institution. There must be some kind of trick to this, too..... but, Arema did not have the leisure to find it out now.

『……No helping it, it's my complete defeat this time. But old man, I would certainly like to fight you again one day!』

When Arema stated so, she kicked the crane and jumped to the warehouse's roof.

"Hmph! I'm not free enough for that."

The shadows who surrounded Arema pursued her without a moment's delay, but as expected Arema's stamina was exhausted to the point where she had trouble taking on this number of foes.

(Well, it isn't like I don't have a trump card, but..... I can't use it without XingLu-chan's permission after all.)

While muttering so in her mind, Arema put her hand on her throat.

Having said that, it was boring to just run away.

She would be too embarrassed to meet XingLu if she did not return at least with a minimum present.

When she was pondering whether there was not something that she could bring back as she ran on the warehouse's roof, data from unknown sender were suddenly sent into Arema's portable terminal. Arema's portable terminal was a special-made one and people who could contact on this were quite limited, so there was no need for them to conceal their identity.

Though it was too suspicious, Arema opened the data without hesitation.

(Hey, hey, this is.....!)

While running being struck by raindrops, Arema compared the harbor block's map attached to the data with the present location.

If this were the real thing, it looked like she would be able to go back with a good present.

*

“.....Father, shall I increase the number of pursuers? I feel a little uneasy with only four people chasing her.”

“No, ignore her.”

Bujinsai replied to his daughter Eika as he watched Arema's figure disappear into the rain.

As Arema guessed, Eika was an extremely rare healing ability user. Her ability allowed the complete recovery of a serious wound in just a few minutes by simultaneously using special medicines, but it could only be manifested on blood relatives.

This time, Bujinsai took along two persons other than Eika with a similar healing ability. All of them were precious treasures.

“More importantly, we must first give top priority to the mission's accomplishment. I took more time than expected facing her.”

It was almost evening already. There was also the option of waiting until <Pan-Dora>'s foresight stock was used up as is by the Kinoes' attack in waves, but risks would increase if he took more time than this.

Even if it was a harbor block where mechanization advanced, it was not always completely unmanned and the barrier put up to ward off people was not absolute, either. There might be the intervention of a third party like a

little while ago.

Just in case, he had asked support of blockading this whole area to the Shadow Star; but to begin with Bujinsai did not trust them that much.

There, one Kinoe appeared as if oozing from the warehouse's shade and whispered into Bujinsai's ear.

"—"

"Good grief"

Should he say it was as expected; it was a report which gave him a headache.

"What happened?"

"It seems that one mouse got in. Geez, so those guys of the Shadow Star can't even handle this level of work satisfactorily, huh."

After pondering for a while, Bujinsai greatly sighed.

"It can't be helped. The minimum of Kinnoes necessary to encircle the target will stay behind and the remaining will be assigned to the elimination of the mouse that got in, and the backing of the Shadow Star."

"What do you mean by backing of the Shadow Star?"

Bujinsai shrugged his shoulders at Eika's question.

"It seems that the friends of the mouse are holding them back. It'll be troublesome if by any chance even they were to get in. I leave the command to you. But don't appear to the vanguard."

"Yes..... And, what will you do, Father?"

"Hmm, isn't it obvious?"

Then, Bujinsai's figure disappeared as it melted into the rain, leaving only a short, uncanny voice.

“—The job.”

Translator and references notes

[1]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty-Six_Stratagems, not that I know what it's implied here

[2]she means to say here that they were so slow that it looks to her like they were not moving

[3]Note that Fuyuka's clan is called Umenokouji (already spoke of in the previous chapters) an ancient clan like the Yabuki

[4]妖仙 is read as You Tian, is literally impossible to translate to English, as they have root in Chinese's Daoism. If compelled to find a meaning in English, it'd be 'Celestial Demon'

Chapter 6 – Time for Disasters

“I-I’m sorry for being late!”

As Corona rolled into the student council president room, Dirk knitted his brows at her entrance.

“...What’s that?”

“Eh?”

Corona’s eyes wavered blankly and looked back at Dirk.

It was a face saying that she had no idea of what he was talking about.

Dirk asked again in a rough tone as he was more irritated than usual.

“I’m asking what all this luggage is...!”

Corona had both her hands full of shopping bags and in addition, she carried even a rucksack on her back.

The contents seemed to be books with papers which became rare nowadays. They should be quite heavy, but Corona was more or less a *<Genestella>*, too.

“A-Ah, do you mean this? But I heard that I was off duty today, so I went up to the central district for the first time in a while. And then, I was suddenly called by the vice-president; but he said that I should hurry, so I directly came here without stopping by the dorm. No, to tell the truth, it’s heavy as expected; so I thought about returning to my room once, but...”

Corona started spewing out something that could be taken as either an excuse or boasting, but Dirk interrupted it in a quiet voice.

“—Tell a fortune.”

“Huh?”

“It’s fine, so hurry up and tell a fortune, you stupid woman!”

“Hiyaaah! Y-Yes! Understood!”

Corona, who was startled by Dirk’s angry voice, hurriedly tossed her packages aside and then took out tarot cards from her uniform’s breast pocket.

And while lining them on the floor, she nervously looked at Dirk.

“Errr, anything is fine to tell a fortune of today, too..... right?”

“You bastard, how many times do you intend to make me say the same thing?”

“Hiii! S-Sorry!”

With a face looking like she would burst into tears at any moment, Corona hurriedly arranged the preparation for the fortune-telling.

Kashimaru Corona, who was Dirk’s secretary, was a <Strega> with a special ability.

However, Corona herself did not know that she was a <Strega>, neither was she registered into this country’s <Strega> list.

This was because the activation conditions of her ability were very strict, and she could not be distinguished from a mere <Genestella> other than when it activated.

—Her ability was prediction that would absolutely be off the mark.

In other words, the contents coming out of Corona’s fortune-telling would

never occur no matter what happened.

At first glance, it could be regarded as an absolutely useless ability; but this became an extremely big advantage in an information war.

“Errr, well then today..... Ah, that’s right! I happened to hear it on my way here, but it seems that Seidoukan student council president has gone missing. I’m worried, so I shall tell the fortune regarding her safety.”

There were three conditions for Corona’s ability to activate.

The first one was the fortune-telling time to be the evening.

“Well then, I shall begin.....”

The second was for Corona herself to decide the contents of the fortune telling.

When Corona closed her eyes and began to rearrange the cards, a bluish-white magic circle appeared around her.

And then the third was that she could only activate it once a day.

“—Okay, it is this!”

Corona finished turning five cards and opened her eyes.

“How’s it?”

“Yes, please wait a minute..... Eeh!?”

Corona, who checked them, raised a voice of surprise and stepped back.

As usual, Corona’s each action was exaggerated.

“What’s the matter? Say it.”

When Dirk urged her as such, Corona frowned as she was troubled.

“Um, that’s..... a result that is a little hard to say came out.....”

After having looked around restlessly, Corona quietly whispered into Dirk’s ear as if she would be troubled should someone else hear it.

“.....Tch! Is it true?”

Dirk, who heard the result, clicked his tongue and stared at Corona.

“Hiii.....! It’s true, it’s true!”

At his gaze’s intensity, Corona stepped back while nodding her head several times.

No longer paying attention to such Corona, Dirk muttered while deepening the wrinkles on his forehead.

“Damn..... what the hell is happening?”

*

Seidoukan Academy’s harbor block surrounded a part of the academy, but because it was separated with a canal-like waterway, one could not normally cross over to there by walking. Unless one did not something unreasonable like crossing by swimming, there were three routes.

One was the water route using a ship, it was used in case of carrying in goods from the satellite cities of the lakeshore and airport; this was the most common route.

Another one was the vehicles route to carry in goods from Asterisk urban areas.

And the last one was the underground route connected from the academy interior (Accurately speaking, the vehicles route also went along the academy underground, but vehicles other than those that received

permission from the academy could not enter).

Inevitably, a student could only use this underground route if he was going to cross over to the harbor block.

Ayato, who had regrouped with Julis and company, were advancing at a quick pace through the underground passage juxtaposed to the rail side for automatic conveyance.

“.....However, to think that Yabuki was a member of Shadow Star, eh.”

Julis, who moved beside Ayato, muttered so with a grim face.

“I was completely deceived. He has such a dumb look, that Yabuki”

Saya also agreed to it and pouted in displeasure.

“Now, now, it’s thanks to that Yabuki that we have come smoothly so far.”

This passage was originally one used by Seidoukan Academy’s special staff and there was no record of it even on the academy guide map. If Eishiro did not tell them about it, they would have probably spent a considerable amount of time just to arrive here.

“You’re right. It’ll be enough to blame him after everything is over. Now, we must first find Claudia as quickly as possible.....”

“Ah..... huh, isn’t that the exit?”

As Kirin spoke out and pointed in front of them, Ayato turned his head and saw the passage ahead was becoming slowly brighter.

“Okay, let’s hurry.....!”

Everyone nodded at Ayato’s words and raised their speed.

“.....The rain became quite strong.”

As soon as they went out, Saya frowned at the raindrops which intensely struck her.

There should still be some time before the sunset, but the surroundings were completely dim. The streetlight which crossed the huge warehouse and the huge crane and rose further highly — they (warehouse and crane), which stood in a row over the rain, somehow looked like eerie monsters.

“Now then, although having come so far is good an all, even if it’s called harbor block, it’s wide. We should first split into groups—!”

As Julis abruptly stopped speaking, everyone scattered in different directions.

Immediately after, a container that was close to the size of a house fell on the place where Ayato and company had been previously standing. After Ayato had rolled out of the way, he looked up to see the crumpled container on the ground.

“.....Unfortunately, I can’t afford to let you proceed ahead from here.”

As soon as the voice was heard, multiple containers rained down in succession. However, instead of aiming for Ayato and company, the containers piled up and formed a wall that blocked their path forward.

“How about it? Why don’t you obediently go back from here?”

The words came from a silhouette that had appeared on top of the wall that had been formed and was looking down at Ayato and company.

That figure, who wore a hood over their eyes, wore an outfit very similar to Eishiro’s that Ayato met a little while ago.

(Shadow Star, huh..... No, before that, the voice just now is.....)

“I don’t know who you’re, but I won’t show mercy if you got in our way.....!”

Though Julis belligerently glared at him, the figure only shrugged his shoulders as if finding it silly.

“Oh my..... you say quite a sad thing, <Glühen Rose>. Have you forgotten me?”

“What?”

Julis knitted her brows dubiously.

But, Ayato had already realized who it was.

“It’s been a while, huh — Silas Norman.”

“Wha.....!?”

Julis opened her eyes wide at the name that Ayato spoke.

“Oh, as expected of <Murakumo>. You did well to remember me.”

When the figure slowly took off his hood, the face of a skinny man with glittering eyes appeared.

There was no mistaking it.

It was Silas Norman, the person who once colluded with Allekant and attacked quite a few of Seidoukan’s prominent students, including Julis, from the shadows.

“.....I didn’t think that you were in the Shadow Star.”

“It was a choice of last resort. Since Seidoukan made a deal with Allekant using me as a pretext, it was absolutely impossible for me to become free. One wrong move and I’d have spent my whole life in confinement. But then, this time there was an offer of deal to me from Seidoukan.”

Spreading his slim hands, Silas spoke talkatively. It looked like his play-like exaggerated words and gestures have not changed.

“They highly valued my ability as a <Dante>, so they asked whether I don’t want to join the Shadow Star.”

“Hou, Isn’t that good for you?”

As Julis sarcastically returned so while being cautious, Silas suddenly flew into rage.

“What is..... What is good about that?! In the end, I’m only a disposable piece with a rope attached to his neck! After all, Seidoukan couldn’t care less whether using me or crushing me! Although it’s better than being confined in a cellar, I’m fed up with such humiliating treatment!”

“.....You reap what you sow”

Saya muttered as she was amazed.

“.....But well, even so it isn’t only a bad thing. After all, an opportunity to take my revenge against you guys has presented itself like this. With that said, the earlier warning was just a façade. Because it’d be disappointing for me if you were to choose to obediently go back.”

As Silas, who grinned, spread his fingers, several containers rose to the air as if responding to it.

Silas’s ability was objet manipulation. He could freely manipulate inorganic matters which he applied a mark on.

“Hou, you came for revenge, huh. It’s good and all to resent us, but don’t tell me that you intend to take on all of us by yourself?”

While being cautious so that she could move anytime, Julis glared at Silas.

“No, no, even I’m not that stupid. After all, I was completely beaten by you guys once. And so.....”

When Silas said so, new figures of people appeared one after another on top

of the containers. All of them wore similar hoods and their faces could not be seen.

Their number exceeded ten.

“No way, are these guys all Shadow Star members.....!?”

To the amazed Julis, Silas stuck out his chest with a calm and composed attitude.

“We’re against you guys who are of high rank, so this amount of people is necessary, isn’t it? Besides..... these guys are much more skilled than me, you know?”

“.....Certainly, they don’t seem to be people we can’t be careless against.”

Kirin, while putting her hand on Senbakiri, warily ran her eyes around.

If for example all the agents of the Shadow Star were experts of the same level as Eishiro, then this was certainly quite a tough situation.

“Kuh.....! But even so, we can’t abandon our comrades.....!”

Julis activated her Rectoluz and mana swirled around her like a storm.

“Bloom proudly — Livingstone Daisy!”

The fiery chakrams fired along with Julis’ shout spread out and swooped down on Silas and company.

As if following after that, the Rectoluz drew a red trace in the air.

A two-step multiple long-range attack. It was a technique uniquely applying to Julis who excelled at space grasp ability.

“I’ll have you let us through by all possible means!”

“Hahaha! It should be like this!”

While letting a dark, joy-filled voice resound, Silas blocked it using a container as a shield, and the other agents jumped from the wall of containers as they also dodged Julis' attacks.

Ayato and company originally did not have time to fight against them here. They had to reach where Claudia was as soon as possible no matter what. However, it was also a fact that it was an opponent whom there was no room for negotiations with.

“I guess I’ve no choice but to do it, huh.....!”

When Ayato put his hand on *<Ser-Versta>* as he was about to, though reluctantly, release all his power, Saya standing back to back with him said in mutter.

“.....Ayato, go.”

Saya established her aim to the agent heading their way and fired Helnekrom which she deployed.

“Kaboom”

However, that agent easily evaded it.

“Hey hey, where are you aiming for?”

The condescending voice of Silas sounded out as he laughed at her shot.

But, that was fine.

“Wha.....!?”

At that time, Ayato had already started running — towards the large hole that Saya’s light bullet created in the container.

Saya’s attack aimed for this from the beginning. Ayato instantly understood it.

“Y-You bastard!”

Silas panicked and dropped container after container on Ayato, attempting to squash him, but it was too late.

Ayato evaded them without dropping his speed, but then he abruptly braked as he suddenly felt bloodlust.

At that moment, an agent, who soundlessly appeared from the shade of a container, stuck out a dagger towards Ayato.

“I won’t let you!”



Then, Kirin broke in there.

As she blocked the dagger's blow with Senbakiri, she turned her gaze at Ayato for only an instant and smiled.

"In that case! I'll smash you guys altogether!"

Then this time, a conspicuously big container dropped at a great speed aiming at Ayato and Kirin who stopped.

"Bloom proudly — Amaryllis!"

But, that too was blown off by a huge explosion that arose in the air.

"Julis!"

When Ayato turned around, Julis loudly said.

"Go, Ayato! If you're the key to save Claudia as Laetitia said, we shall go with role division here!"

Julis returned a fearless smile to Ayato while taking on three agents with her Rectoluz.

"—Sorry! Leave it to me!"

As Ayato said only that, he started running again towards the large hole that Saya opened.

"I said that I won't let you go, right?!"

However, just before it containers opened one after another and from inside the, puppets that appeared one after another like insect blocked his way as they filled the hole.

"Fuhahaha! How about this, I too am not the same like before! The number

of puppets that I can manipulate now is more than thrice the number at that time! Indeed, I can freely use more than 300 puppets—”

“Haa..... looks like you haven’t changed at all, Silas Norman.”

When Ayato muttered so without even turning his eyes to Silas, who boastfully talked, he plunged into the swarm of puppets without slowing down in the slightest.

“Wha.....!?”

“Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Sword Intermediate Technique — “thousand edges separation (Blood run)””[1]

He swung out <Ser-Versta> with all his strength and connected it to the next slash while twisting his body using that power. The Demon Sword, which burnt all things, bisected dozens of puppets with one swing and opened a path while scattering the scraps.

No matter how much the number increased, the puppets that Silas manipulated could not even hold back Ayato.

In no time at all, Ayato had reached the large hole opened up by Saya. He passed through it without looking back.

“W-Wait! Amagiri Ayato! I haven’t yet.....!”

While hearing Silas’ voice behind, Ayato ran in the rainy harbor block.

*

She did not let her guard down even for an instant.

If Claudia were to let her guard down even a little, the old man before her eyes —Bujinsai’s slash would instantly kill her.

“Kuh.....!”

She blocked the staff blow that was aimed to trip her up with her left hand's sword, and attempted to use her right hand's sword to restrain his movements. However, Bujinsai's figure had already jumped back while simultaneously throwing several tobi-kunai at Claudia.

Although Claudia read their trajectories by future foresight and barely evaded them, a red line ran on her cheek as one of them grazed it.

“Haa.....Haa.....!”

Claudia's breathing was rough and her face was distorted due to the burning pain of the wounds carved into her whole body.

Even so, the reason why she did not yet suffer a fatal wound was solely thanks to <Pan-Dora>'s future foresight. That said, its stock was being shaved down little by little by the opponent before her eyes.

(As expected the Yabuki Clan's Head..... I already knew it, but to think it was to this extent.....)

The name “Yabuki Bujinsai” was an inherited name and the bearer was chosen from those who have reached a certain level of ability within the clan. For that reason, there seem to be time when the position was left vacant.

She heard that the current Bujinsai assumed this position nearly 40 years ago. In that case, his ability would naturally be guessed.

(But even so, I can't afford to be defeated without resistance.....!)

After all, she finally reached this place.

She could almost reach the scene of the dream she saw that day. There was no way she could give up on it after coming so far.

Claudia mustered her strength and re-set up her twin swords.

“Hmm..... You’re not bad, young lady. Who would have thought that you’d struggle so far? Even excluding that ogre lux’s ability, it’s quite a feat.”

Bujinsai slowly stroked his chin while looking at such Claudia.

Bujinsai did not have something like a combat stance, always in a relaxed stance. And yet, he had no openings.

“But, what would you gain by struggling until there? Even though you should understand that the conclusion wouldn’t change even by having delayed some time. Or, does even a person of your caliber want to cling on to life?”

At that way of speaking of Bujinsai, Claudia slightly burst into laughter.

“Fufufu, I am really glad to be praised by someone of Bujinsai-dono’s caliber..... but unfortunately you are slightly off the mark.”

“Hou?”

“Bujinsai-dono — no, nobody in the world would be able to understand, but at this moment, I can’t stop the violent throbbing in my chest. From now on, I am looking forward to that time so much.....! Fufufu! I didn’t imagine that my heart could become so disturbed.....!”

Claudia turned and smiled from the bottom of her heart at Bujinsai.

“.....Good grief”

Bujinsai, who saw it, scratched his head.

“Be it that World Dragon’s brat or you, it looks like only strange people gather in this town, eh.”

“Ara, speaking of strange people, isn’t Bujinsai-dono’s son the quite strange one, too?”

“Gunuh, you poke where it hurts.....”

The moment when Bujinsai smiled wryly as he said so, his left hand suddenly moved.

(A tobi-kunai of surprise attack.....! But!)

When Claudia turned her body and dodged it, she launched a blow to check Bujinsai, who shortened the distance in an instant.

As Bujinsai easily parried it with his staff and jumped into Claudia's range, he released a palm stroke with his left hand.

"However, you're just devoting yourself to defense!"

"Yes, after all my attacks won't work on you anyway..... right?!"

While saying so, Claudia rotated her body in the air and leaped back.

This was because Bujinsai's Taijutsu far exceeded Claudia's and she was at an overwhelming disadvantage at this range.

"What, your sword lines are fluent and stern..... it isn't something to be so modest about! You won't know unless you try!"

"No, no, of course, I know.....!"

The staff of Bujinsai, who set pursuit, and Claudia's <Pan-Dora> clashed with each other and scattered sparks of mana in the rain.

"The Yabuki Clan's hidden technique, void tide — it isn't something that someone like me can break, right?"

"!"

While locking twin swords to staff, Bujinsai's eyes slightly narrowed down.

".....Where did you learn that?"

Claudia, not answering it, continued further.

“The barrier to ward off people that you guys use, I hear that’s also an application of the void tide technique. A combination of color and patterns that people instinctively avoid..... you manipulate their actions by imprinting such a pattern into their unconsciousness using mana as intermediary; in short, it’s a kind of simple mind interference, right?”

“.....”

In other words, even if Claudia were to launch attacks at Bujinsai, she would unconsciously divert them (attacks).

This was also true when defending; so unless Claudia was able to redefine her actions by utilizing <Pan-Dora>’s future foresight, she would end up moving herself towards the enemy’s attack trajectory even if she had intended to dodge it.

“The activation is instantaneous and it barely consumes any mana, thus I can’t read the timing as well..... After all, it’s a technique that goes back from the old century when mana was still extremely scarce. The mana’s movement can also only be felt as a minor fluctuation, right?”

The effect was really just as smaller though.

<Genestella> had strong resistance against mind interference by mana, so there was no way that one (mind interference) with that small degree of output (mana) would work on them.

But, this technique, which appealed to a person’s original instinct, could show effect regardless of that resistance.

“Certainly if it’s only to strangle a person to death, one doesn’t expressly need to spout hell fire or call a large toad. It’s indeed logical.”

“.....Phew”

The moment when Bujinsai sighed as such, a chill that Claudia had not felt until now ran down her spine.

(This, is.....! I thought that it would work to buy some time, but it looks like I said a little too much.....)

It seemed like she had stepped on a tiger's tail.

Claudia tried to distance herself from Bujinsai immediately, but—

“—!?”

For some reason, her body stiffened and she could not move.

Then, the staff's butt end deeply sank into Claudia's abdomen and she was blown off without raising her voice.

Bujinsai silently threw tobi-kunais to Claudia, who rolled on the ground, which got wet with rain, like a ball while splashing water.

“Kuh.....!”

Claudia attempted to extract the kunai's that had pierced both her hands and feet while twisting her body, but her movement was halted by Bujinsai throwing more kunai at her shoulders and thighs.

“AAAAAAAH!”

It looked like he threw them casually, but his attacks were accurate and Claudia could no longer do anything other than twisting her body in pain.

“I feel like I understand the reason why my masters (meaning Galaxy) ordered me to get rid of you. I can't fathom the bottom of your knowledge. It feels like all secrets are exposed before you.”

Bujinsai said so indifferently, yet with a voice filled with clear disgust.

“Fufufu..... no way, I’m not God, so there’s no way such a thing is..... Kuuuh!”

Bujinsai did not move his brows even once at the voice that Claudia squeezed out as she tried to gain time even if a little while enduring pain.

(Kuh.....! At this rate.....!)

Impatience arose in Claudia’s heart.

Not yet.

Even though she still had to gain time a little more.

“Enough. If you can’t move, the future foresight is meaningless — die.”

Tobi-kunais were thrown aiming at Claudia’s middle forehead, throat and heart.

As Bujinsai said, without a future where she could evade them, there would be no meaning even if she foresaw it.

But—

“Ah.....! I have been waiting for you.....”

With a face smeared with mud and blood, Claudia muttered with a smile filled with intoxication and delight.

Immediately after, as soon as a black whirlwind swept over, a silhouette, which set up a huge sword, stood up as to protect Claudia.



Translator and references notes

[1] pretty sure the wordplay here is 血走り which stand for “blood shot” or literally from it Kanji, Blood run. by dragon1412

Chapter 7 – Evening

“Claudia, are you safe?”

Ayato, who was standing in front of Claudia to protect her, asked without looking back.

He wanted to tend to her immediately if possible, but the pressure released from the enemy he was confronting did not allow it.

“Although it is difficult to say that I’m safe... for the time being, it looks I’m fine.”

“I see, glad to hear.”

Anyway, they seemed to have avoided the worse situation.

Even so, when Ayato thought about what would have happened if he had arrived just a moment later, he shuddered then felt an intense anger welling up inside of him.

“Brat...Are you <Murakumo>?”

To the old man’s calm question, Ayato nodded while setting up <Ser-Versta> in a seigan stance[1].

“And you’re Yabuki Bujinsai, right?”

“Hou, do you know me?”

“...I heard about you from your son.”

As Ayato answered honestly, Bujinsai stroked his chin as if he was bewildered.

“I see; now that you mention it, you’re in the same room as that stupid son of mine, right? Does that fool give you any trouble?”

“—Can I ask you to withdraw?”

Even knowing that it was impossible, Ayato tentatively asked any way.

After all, it was his friend’s father. Ayato was quite enraged at the fact that he was going to kill Claudia and thus had no intention to forgive him at all; but it would be for the best if he could end it without fighting.

“Kakaka! You’re quite straightforward. I don’t dislike that honesty of yours, but..... unfortunately, I can’t do that.”

Bujinsai smiled broadly while moving his staff as it made a clattering sound.

But, the pressure just increased instead.

“.....Then, can you at least give me some time?”

“Hmm?”

Though Bujinsai quizzically frowned, the pressure loosened only just a little.

Ayato, who took it as an approval, turned to Claudia and bent down. Of course, he did not relax his vigilance nonetheless.

“Ayato.....”

Claudia stretched out her hand to Ayato’s face as her eyes got wet with tears. After taking her hand and holding it softly, Ayato took something out of his pocket.

“Claudia, I was entrusted with it by your friend.”

“Eh.....?”

Perplexity spread on Claudia’s enraptured face.

“This is.....”

“This is something from Laetitia-san to you.”

Ayato finished speaking and was going to put the silver amulet in Claudia’s hand, but as she couldn’t put any strength into her hand and it almost fell to the ground, he excused himself and placed it inside her pocket.

“It seems to be a good luck charm.”

“N-No, I know that, but..... such a thing, I.....”

Claudia looked strangely puzzled for some reason, but before he could ask for the reason, bloodlust released from Bujinsai assailed Ayato.

It looked like he was not willing to wait any longer.

“Sorry, Claudia. I’ll end it immediately.”

“Ah.....”

Claudia stretched her hand trying to hold back Ayato, but she immediately stopped it and revealed her usual smile.

“—No, it’s nothing. Good luck, Ayato.”

After also returning a smile to her words, Ayato once again faced Bujinsai.

“Sorry, I’d really like to let you slowly have your last tryst, but I also have my hands full, you see? I can’t afford to waste any more time.”

“.....I don’t mind it. Because I don’t intend to let this be the last.”

These words that he casually returned became the signal.

When he cut down the tobi-kunais suddenly thrown from Bujinsai’s hand, shurikens swooped down on him carving an arc in the air. Ayato was going to shorten the distance to Bujinsai while evading them by turning his body, but

in just the instant when he took his gaze off his opponent, Bujinsai's figure disappeared.

“!”

If he has not fought Eishiro — if he has not experienced this skill of taking one's opponent's back, the fight would have been settled at this point in time.

Ayato escaped by reflexively rolling forward. Though he ended up plunging headlong into a puddle of water, he had no room to mind it. After all, if he did not do so, his head might have been separated from his trunk.

“Hmm.....?”

Bujinsai, whose staff's slash ended up in an empty swing, dubiously glared at Ayato.

“You, that movement just now.....”

He seemed to have guessed with that alone.

“Well whatever. In that case, I'll cut off your neck right from the front.”

Bujinsai's body swayed, melting into the rain, and the next moment, he appeared in Ayato's range.

(Fast.....!)

Ayato immediately raised *<Ser-Versta>* so as to fight back — there, he suddenly recalled Eishiro's words.

『Listen well, Amagiri. If you're to fight my father, I'll give a piece of advice. Succeeding in dealing a hit to my father is a next to impossible feat, and that's also true when it comes to avoiding his attacks. That's why—』

As Ayato took a defensive stance using *<Ser-Versta>* as a shield, he

concentrated prana.

“Guh.....!”

“Hmm!?”

The attack that aimed for the scruff of Ayato’s neck landed firmly, but fortunately, Ayato’s head was still connected to his body. He had raised his defensive power greatly by concentrating prana in various places. The vitals located into *<Ser-Versta>*’s guard range and the tendons of his hands and feet — the attacks were easy to read since Bujinsai’s attacks were very accurate.

Bujinsai slightly flinched at this; at that opening, Ayato slashed down with *<Ser-Versta>* and regained some distance.

As he put his hand on his neck where he had received the slash, it seemed to be bleeding, but it was not a deep wound.

“I see; so thinking that you can’t dodge, you just had to endure. You may say that this is tactics possible thanks to your huge amount of prana.”

As Bujinsai said, prana’s consumption was intense with this method; an ordinary *<Genestella>* would have already dried up.

“But, that’s just a temporary measure. You too seem to have some knowledge regarding my technique, but even if you prepare a shield, what about the sword? With just devoting yourself to defense, your prana will run out sooner or later.”

“.....”

In fact, his words were spot on.

With these tactics, even if he could endure for a while, he would not be able to defeat Bujinsai.

But—

“I came here after preparing two strategies at least, so do you want to try them out?”

“Hou.”

“Although, both of them are head-on breakthrough that can hardly be called strategies.....!”

As Ayato tightly gripped *<Ser-Versta>*, he slashed at Bujinsai from the front.

Bujinsai dodged that slash by jumping diagonally, kicking the crane and then jumping even higher.

As Ayato chased him in the same way, he swung out *<Ser-Versta>* horizontally. Bujinsai dodged it by twisting his body in the air, landing on the warehouse’s roof — and then swing his staff aiming at Ayato’s head that had landed a moment later.

While enduring it by concentrating his prana there, Ayato forcibly moved to attack. He sliced up from a low position and then slashed down from overhead where the opponent bent down.

Though Bujinsai’s staff was an unusual lux, it was not something which could block *<Ser-Versta>*. Inevitably, as Bujinsai could do nothing but dodge the attack, Ayato hurriedly connected another sword strike.

—The first strategy that Ayato prepared was to increase the number of strikes.

Even Bujinsai’s technique could not be used infinitely. In that case, regardless of how many times he dodged, Ayato just had to keep only attacking until his opponent exhausted himself.

“Kukuku..... This is certainly a high-handed measure that can’t be called

strategy. But, it's unexpectedly troublesome when you got hit by it."

Although he was mouthing off, Bujinsai occasionally launched accurate counterattacks while dodging Ayato's slashes. Even so, Ayato endured all of them by defense with prana and frantically swung <Ser-Versta>. Ayato's body was visibly becoming scarred and he was bleeding here and there, but he could not mind it.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Sword Intermediate Technique—"Ten Boosting Thistles"!"

"Oops"

Even the surprise rotation slash that was going to hit Bujinsai was easily dodged by him.

No, far from it—

"Kuku, I know that technique!"

"Wha.....!?"

With a palm stroke which aimed at the slight opening immediately after the end of the slash, Ayato was blown a long distance away.

Though he fell from the warehouse's roof and landed on the ground, Bujinsai had already gone down to the ground too when Ayato raised his body.

(This is..... a much more powerful enemy than I imagined.....)

First, their abilities were purely different. If it was a fight with simple specs such as physical strength, the young Ayato would be above; but one might say that considering factors such tactics and the way of taking range, the experience was different.

Moreover, what happened just now.....

“Hou, so you noticed after all. That’s right, I know the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style that you use.”

“.....So, it’s like that after all.”

Otherwise, no matter if he was an expert, there was no way he could aim at the opening of the “Ten Boosting Thistles” when seeing it for the first time.

“It may look like this, but our clan has been in this line of job for a long time, you see? We leave behind records on information of opponents we fought against during these several hundred years and inherit them. If I’m not mistaken, records, that we have fought the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style’s users several times, remain.”

Certainly, since the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style was an old style, this in itself was not strange. It was also probably thanks to the fact that not only the technique, but also the sword line was seen through.

But..... if that was the case, it might be difficult to overcome the opponent by increasing the number of strikes.

“Now then, could you show the other strategy you spoke of?”

Bujinsai said as if reading Ayato’s thought.

“Even without you telling me.....!”

“Hmm.....!”

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Ayato tightly gripped <Ser-Versta> with both hands and, along with a cry, poured prana into it.

—It was the Meteor Arts.

According to Eishiro, it seemed that Bujinsai's technique affected the opponent's unconsciousness so as to interfere with his actions.

In that case, how about if he used a large-scale attack that could not be affected by a bit of interference.

"Uoooooooooooooooh!"

The blade of <Ser-Versta>, which induced an Overboosted Mana Phenomenon after sucking in prana, exceeded 5 meters, and Ayato swung it down diagonally.

"Hmph.....!"

But, that blade hit only Bujinsai's afterimage — Bujinsai easily slipped through that strike; instead of him, the street light at the back was bisected, collapsed and sunk into the lake.

The pouring rain evaporated as soon as it touched the huge blade, causing white smoke to hover above.

"This is again quite a brute force approach. But, isn't it kind of impossible for that big thing to hit me?"

As soon as Bujinsai said that, he simultaneously threw nearly ten tobi-kunais from both his hands.

"Kuh!"

As expected, as Ayato could not cut them down with <Ser-Versta> in this state, he could only evade them by greatly jumping.

And as if having expected it, Bujinsai jumped again into Ayato's bosom.

"I won't let you get away this time. Even if you defended against it, I'll shave off all your remaining prana.....!"



The eyes of Bujinsai, who drew closer, shone dark.

Though, Ayato has been waiting for this chance as well.

As Ayato let go of <Ser-Versta>, while enduring the slash driven on his abdomen by raising his prana, he grappled Bujinsai at the timing of the body tackle.

(In order to surely bring down an opponent superior in speed and technique, there's only this.....!)

“What!?”

This was an application of the strategy that Ayato had used in a duel with Kirin before.

The Amagiri Bright Dragon Style was originally an ancient martial art that assumed a battle in a wearing-armor state, and the foundation of its Grappling Technique was in the technique of pinning down one's opponent rather than in striking or throwing technique. This was because once one pushed down a heavy-armored warrior and took the top (position wise, I guess), victory was certain.

Thus, this was the origin of the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style, and a conspicuously uncouth technique—

“Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Grappling Technique —“Bowing Vine””

Ayato grabbed Bujinsai's arm, then fell toward him while kicking his legs out.

Since it was basically a bodily crash, this too would not be greatly affected by a bit of interference on his movements.

“Gunuh.....!”

If it was Bujinsai, who held knowledge of the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style, he would probably know many ways to escape from this state.

That's why Ayato immediately took the next action.

He drove in a fist, which he increased the power by concentrating prana, into Bujinsai's chest from point-blank range.[2]

"Similarly[3] — "Mikazuchi"!"

"Gahah.....!"

A shock enough to make the air shake went through Bujinsai's body and a small crater was created on the ground behind him

It was a special version of Mikazuchi by adding offensive power of his prana onto to the original Mikazuchi.

(As expected with this, then.....!)

"__"

But, the moment when Ayato, who thought having brought him down, relaxed his attention, Bujinsai suddenly opened his eyes wide.

Immediately after, Ayato's body stiffened and he was unable to lift even one finger.

(Binding technique.....!)

While he was pinned down, Bujinsai drove a palm strike into the defenseless Ayato.

"Kuhah!"

Ayato was sent flying through the air and he impacted against the ground without any time to prepare for the fall.

“That’s a payback, you brat.....!”

Spitting out saliva mixed with blood, Bujinsai wiped his lips with his fist.

“But, you’ve really done it. I didn’t intend to go easy on you nor did I intend to be careless, but I was a little too observing, I guess. Consider that from now I’ll no longer give you even the slightest opening.”

Clear anger blurred into Bujinsai’s words.

“Guh.....!”

On the other hand, although Ayato could move to a small extent compared to earlier, most of his body still couldn’t move. At the very most, he could drunkenly stand up.

“It’s useless. The binding technique’s effect hasn’t disappeared yet. You’re quite something by being able to move that much, but.....”

When Bujinsai planted his staff into the ground while saying so, he casually threw a total of eight tobi-kunais left and right from both his hands slovenly hanging down.

“!”

Ayato was not in a condition to be able to avoid them. While barely covering his face with both his hands, he endured them while raising his prana.

It would be bad if he did not somehow break this binding technique.

Ayato, maintaining the prana he raised as is, peeked at Bujinsai from the gap of his arms and was shocked.

“.....Now then, I wonder how long you’ll be able to endure it.”

When Bujinsai muttered so, tobi-kunais were already grasped again in both his hands.

(No way, does he intend to overcome me like this.....?!)

It was like a storm of raging steels.

Each blade of Bujinsai's one-sided attack, which continued without end, tore Ayato's flesh and made his bones creak.

While gritting his teeth and enduring their violence, Ayato felt the prana he invested into defense decreasing at a frightening pace.

However, nothing could be done as he could not even move his body as he wanted.

—And.

“Haa.....! Haa.....!”

Perhaps dozens, no hundreds of tobi-kunais struck Ayato's body.

Not knowing exactly with what kind of materials they were made, those tobi-kunais melted in the rain a short time later, turned into a black liquid and formed an eerie puddle at Ayato's feet.

Ayato weakly fell to his knees in that pitch black puddle.

His prana was already about to reach the bottom and he had wounds all over his body.

“.....It's already time, I guess.”

Looking at such Ayato, Bujinsai pulled out his staff. It looked like he intended to deliver the final blow.

As he declared earlier, the slowly approaching Bujinsai did not show even the slightest opening.

(This is..... seriously bad.....)

While seeing it with his view that became blurred, although he tried to muster his strength, his body could not move after all.

It was at that time.

“Ayato, get a hold of yourself! Your power shouldn’t be just to this extent, right?!”

Claudia’s strong and straightforward voice struck his ears.

It was strangely convincing, and he immediately knew that it was not just consolation or encouragement.

And — before he noticed, Ayato suddenly stood up inside darkness.

No, more exactly, he was overlooking at another himself standing inside darkness with a bird’s-eye view.

(This place is.....)

Although perplexed, he immediately understood. This was because he has experienced something similar before.

This was an image — the image of the chains of imprisonment which bound Ayato.

Just like when he had seen before, three locks were applied on the binding chains that shackled Ayato. The first was broken, the second was undone. And as for the third.....there was still a lock there.

When Ayato slowly opened his clenched hand, there appeared a shining key.

But, he understood it intuitively. That this key was still incomplete. Just a little more and it’d become a complete key; though only a little, it was not enough.

Even so, Ayato unhesitantly inserted that key into the third lock. Even if it

was incomplete, even if it was not enough and would last for only a short time just like when he broke the first lock before, if he could undo this binding, then—

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“Now then, with this it’s over.”

Bujinsai said so and swung down the staff he raised in this rainy weather at the nape of Ayato Amagiri’s neck.

Though it took quite time, the obstacle would safely be eliminated with this. Afterwards, he just had to get rid of the target and then the job would be complete.

Right — or at least it should have been like that.

“!?”

But, the strike that should have hit Ayato’s head instead cut through air. The figure of Ayato, who was weakly down on his knees until a moment ago, had disappeared.

As he turned around taken aback, behind Bujinsai— in a place a little distance away, it (Ayato’s figure) stood there.

“Since when.....?! No, more importantly.....!”

Ayato, who stood struck by the rain, had his head slightly hanging down and his expression could not be perceived; but Bujinsai unintentionally took a step back at the presence emitted from his body.

The amount of prana was without change on the verge of drying up. He did not hold any weapon, had wounds all over his body and the bleeding was very bad, too.

And yet.

(What is this unpleasant feeling.....?)

Bujinsai felt cold sweat streaming down his back.

He did not want to admit it nor did he want to believe it, but Bujinsai's instinct issued a clear danger signal.

(To think that I'm overawed by such a brat.....!)

Bujinsai threw four tobi-kunais with his left hand as to shake it off. Though they were thrown only to check his response, they also served the purpose of allowing him to shorten the distance if there was an opening.

The binding technique, which was an application of the void tide technique, was a skill which sealed an opponent's movements by creating an extreme state of tension, but there was first the need to look into the opponent's eyes at a close distance. Although he did not understand why the technique was undone, it would be fine as long as he cast it once again.

“.....”

Ayato, silent as is, evaded the tobi-kunais by just slightly moving his body.

Although, Bujinsai had taken this much into consideration.

Aiming at the small opening created there, he was about to instantly shorten the distance at a speed that overwhelmingly surpassed the opponent—

“Guah.....!?”

However, as if spoiling his start, Ayato's fist caught Bujinsai in the chin.

(I-Impossible.....! He's too fast.....!)

There was not even an opening to cast the void tide technique.

Ayato's stance and movements should not have changed compared with a while ago.

But, only his degree of skill has been sharpened beyond comparison.

(Eei! What on earth happened.....?!)

While being confused, Bujinsai promptly leaped back taking distance.

But then, he suddenly noticed.

Once again, he lost sight of Ayato.

At the same time, his intuition as a shinobi that he has cultivated for many years informed him of danger coming from behind him

(This is.....! This skill of taking the opponent's back is our.....!)

“Ripping apart the five viscera and severing the four limbs—”

And then, that voice resounded in the ear of Bujinsai, who was going to turn around in a hurry.

“—Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Grappling Technique, “Nine-Fanged Hammer”!”

Immediately, a storm-like series of blows were driven into Bujinsai. Nine series of blows which broke both his arms, crushed both his legs and gouged his liver, heart, spleen, lungs and kidney in turns—the last blow was an elbow strike launched by fiercely stepping forward.

“Gufuh!?”

Bujinsai's body that was sent flying was flung against the base of the large crane and was sewed on like crucifixion by the shock.

“Guuh..... I-Impossible.....! For such a thing to.....!”

While squeezing voice of resentment, Bujinsai glared at Ayato who was slowly approaching his way.

*

It was a mysterious sensation.

It was not that a special power was boiling up, but it was just like he returned to the self he should originally be, like he was just sharpened; it was such a sensation.

Afterwards, he only had to follow that sensation.

With only that, he had overwhelmed Bujinsai.

“.....But, it’s not over yet, huh.”

Ayato leaked out such words.

Even after being struck by the “Nine-Fanged Hammer”, Bujinsai has not yet lost his fighting spirit. It looked like he could not stop Bujinsai unless he made him lose consciousness.

As Ayato advanced in order to settle the fight — he fell to his knees at the acute pain which suddenly assailed him.

“GUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHAH!”

—Time up.

Magic circles and chains of imprisonment appeared around Ayato and coiled around Ayato.

“F-For it to happen at such a time.....!”

Ayato could not help cursing, but his big sister’s ability was powerful and he had no technique to go against it.

On the other hand, a smile convinced of victory appeared on Bujinsai's face.

A tobi-kunai appeared on his hand and was thrown at Ayato.

For the current Ayato, it was impossible to defend against or dodge it.

While looking at the black blade approaching in slow motion, Ayato somehow tried to struggle until the end, but it was useless.

However, just before that blade reached Ayato—

“—Ayato!”

Claudia, who widened both her hands as to cover Ayato, broke in.

“Claudia!”

Though he promptly shouted so, there was no way he made it in time.

A flower of fresh blood blew up within the dark, cold rain.

Translator and references notes

[1]stance with a sword aiming at the eye

[2]the technique used here is called 寸剣(すんけい); so basically it's a technique where Ayato drove in a fist and releases an internal energy. Kind of like here: http://images.google.fr/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Fivedoor.blogimg.jp%2Fonecall_dazeee%2Fimgs%2F0%2Fb%2F0b63feb9.jpg&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fonecall2ch.com%2Farchives%2F7591622.html&h=374&w=500&tbnid=OVZt9GjcPv4DgM%3A&docid=o2UK4sUQqVLExM&ei=WiWnV8z8LYyLgAaJ44GIDw&tbo=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=535&page=3&start=71&ndsp=39&ved=0ahUKEwjMkfC

No6_OAhWMBcAKHYIxAPEQMwjgASheMF4&bih=887&biw=1280

[3]as in Amagiri Bright Dragon Style, Grappling Technique

Chapter 8 – Midnight

“Claudia!”

Ignoring the acute pain running through his body, Ayato held Claudia in his arms.

A black blade was stuck deeply into her chest and the overflowing blood had soaked her torn uniform.

“Fufufu... are you safe, Ayato...?”

Even so, Claudia stretched out her hand to Ayato’s cheek while smiling gently.

“Yes, I’m fine...! More importantly, about you, Claudia...!”

As he spoke, Ayato realized that she was in quite a dangerous condition.

“Ah... sorry, Ayato... please, don’t make such a face... you’ve done, nothing wrong after all... Even if I say that, it’ll be no use, I guess... Fufufu... really, sorry...”

Despite the situation she was in, Claudia had an expression of satisfaction that had never been seen on her face before.

“I’m... really, selfish... but, Fufufu... finally... I’ve finally reached this time...”

“Claudia! Hang in there!”

Ayato pressed the wound trying to stop the bleeding even a little, but it was no use at all.

“That’s right... even in the dream... no, exactly this moment that I saw in the dream... how long I have eagerly waited for it... you’ll probably never

understand..."

Claudia's voice got gradually weaker and blurred.

Her pupils have already lost their focus.

Before long, a trickle of tears spilled over the corner of her eyes mixing with raindrops.

"Ah... I'm very happy... Ayato... to me, such... such a wonderful time... surely after this...no matter how much time passes.... Such a feeling, I will never..."

The hand that was touching Ayato's cheek weakly fell.

"Claudia!"

He shuddered for a moment, but it looked like she just lost consciousness.

Although the wound was deep, he would probably make it in time if he carried her to a hospital. Director Jan Korbel's motto was not just for show.

—However.

"Kukuku.....! This is splendid; I picked up luck in an unexpected way.....!"

".....!"

Ayato glared at Bujinsai who shook his shoulders as he said so while staggering.

"After all, the original target is that young lady."

The old man, whose eyes glittered, picked up his staff that fell on the ground, his gaze showing no signs of faltering at all, and turned it towards Ayato and Claudia.

"But, as expected I won't feel relieved until I drop them. Both your heads, that is.....!"

It looked like Bujinsai still intended to continue.

Though Bujinsai seemed to be wounded quite severely, Ayato had also reached his limit.

Although he did not know to what extent he could fight back, he could not just sit back and wait to be beaten without doing anything.

(No matter what it takes, I must pull through this and carry Claudia to a hospital as soon as possible.....!)

“Hmm.....?”

But then, a black-clothed figure suddenly appeared before such Bujinsai and whispered something into his ear.

“__”

“What.....?”

Bujinsai’s expression distorted and he annoyingly clicked his tongue.

“Tch, no choice then.....! Let’s temporarily retreat!”

As soon as he spoke, Bujinsai plunged into the rainy, dark night and disappeared with the cloaked figure.

“.....I don’t quite understand, but did we pull through.....?”

『——Well, I caused quite a chaos in their ranks by crushing their healing ability users after all. And incidentally, the young ladies over there seem to have rampaged quite a lot, so they would probably soon reach their limits in blockading this area.』

A space window that displayed these words suddenly appeared in front of Ayato as he was muttering to himself in utter amazement.

“Uwah.....!?”

As the space window moved, Ayato followed it to the figure of a woman, with a strange mask, emerging from the shade of a warehouse.

Although Ayato immediately put his guard up, the woman waved at him in a panic.

『No, um, I know that telling you not to be on your guard would be unreasonable, but can you at least stay quiet there and trust me?』

The characters on the space window were replaced by new ones and the woman raised both her arms as to show that he had no intention to fight.

“Who on earth are you.....?”

Upon close inspection, the woman also had injuries here and there on her body. They were quite serious injuries at that, and in reality, just standing was probably painful for her.

『I can't reveal it, and there shouldn't be time to leisurely explain the situation, right? There's a pleasure boat, which I board on, nearby and a car has also been arranged on the opposite bank. I can send you two to a hospital.』

Certainly, it was difficult for Ayato in his current state to carry Claudia to the hospital from here and he did not know how much time it would take.

“.....Got it. Then please.”

As Ayato made up his mind and said so, the woman greatly nodded.

『Okay, now that it's been decided, let's hurry. From what I see, she seems to be in quite a dangerous state.』

“Yes.....!”

She did not need to say it as he knew it.

Ayato carried Claudia and followed the woman moving ahead.

『Oh, that's right. I saw the fight earlier, but it was quite thrilling seeing how you kicked that old man's ass. You ain't bad.』

“Yea.....”

『……As I thought, I want to have a bout with you one day, too.』

These words, which were displayed, disappeared immediately after a short moment along with the space window.

Thus, Ayato did not see them.

*

“Retreat, you say.....!?”

The melee where allies and enemies were jumbled together suddenly stopped at this voice of Silas.

Julis, who was breathing heavily, looked at Saya and Kirin to see what was going on, but the two girls also had perplexed expressions, indicating that they were also clueless as to what has halted the assault.

“W-What is the meaning of this.....?! I didn't hear about it.....!?”

It seemed to be the same for the enemy side though.

Surrounding Julis and company were the Shadow Star's agents, who put on a hood, and several men in black clothes that joined in the middle of the battle. The latter was probably the Yabuki Clan.

When they were facing only the Shadow Star, Julis and company had the

upper hand instead — probably because the Shadow Star's number one purpose was to hold them back at all costs — but, after the Yabuki Clan joined, the situation instantly reversed and Julis and company were steadily cornered.

Even so, that they could somehow hold out was the results of their repeated special training for the <Gryps>. Even inside the melee, they promptly took coordination and escaped from a predicament, and at times they struggled through by entrusting their backs to each other.

However, one could not deny that they were outnumbered from the beginning.

Moreover, the enemies were not a mob of small fries, each one of them was a suitable expert on his own.

At this rate, they would be overcome before long — or at least it should have been like that when at that time, Silas' flustered voice of earlier resounded.

“Are you telling us to pull back despite cornering them so far? Such, such a thing, I'll never.....!”

“__”

Standing beside Silas was probably a man of the Yabuki Clan.

As he was calm in contrast with the perplexed Silas, no sooner than the man gave a signal, the Yabuki Clan disappeared as if melting from the place of the melee.

“Guuuuh! We'll retreat as well.....!”

Though Silas was bright red in frustration and anger, the containers, who were floating in the air until now, came down one after another at the same

time. It was not as if they were aimed at Julis and company, it was just that he simply cancelled his ability.

Water splash and splinters of the gouged ground flew about, and Julis unintentionally protected her face.

It was just an instant, but the Shadow Star's figures have disappeared when Julis raised her face.

Left behind were Julis and company, who looked at each other and then sank down to the ground at all once before long.

"Haa..... does this mean, that we somehow managed it.....?"

With a face saying that she hadn't quite grasped the situation yet, Kirin muttered so.

".....I'm tired."

Saya rescinded her lux as well and lay down face up.

At the area where water splashed, there seemed to be a big puddle of water, but all of them were already sopping wet anyway. So it would change nothing at this late hour.

"No, our original purpose is Claudia's rescue. Until we confirm it....."

Julis said so and was going to stand up, but she staggered as he could not fill strength in her legs.

"Um, are you all right?"

"Y-Yea, no problem."

She held back the worried Kirin with one hand and greatly exhaled while putting the other hand on the ground-covered debris to support herself.

Because she has released large-scale techniques in succession until a while

ago, she seemed to have considerably consumed prana. Thinking about tomorrow's semifinal, she should naturally have saved it, but it was also a fact that it was not a situation where she could save spare energy.

—Then, she received a call on the portable terminal inside her pocket.

“! Is it Ayato?!”

As Julis cried out, Saya quickly got up and Kirin bent herself forward.

When she hastily opened a space window, Ayato's serious face was projected there.

『——Julis, are you safe?』

“Well, somehow. More importantly, what happened to your side? Where are you right now? And what about Claudia.....?”

To Julis, who enthusiastically questioned in rapid succession, Ayato answered.

『I'm in the hospital right now. And, Claudia is—』

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It was about time when the date changed that Claudia woke up.

“Where is..... this place?”

To Claudia, who slowly opened her eyes, Ayato, who has been at her side all along, teasingly said.

“Unfortunately, it's not heaven.”

Then, Claudia revealed a lonely wry smile, moved only her head and looked at Ayato.

“I know that. Either way, where I'll go will be hell, right?”

“Since you can speak that much, it looks like you’re all right.”

For the time being, he heaved a sigh of relief.

“This is a special room of the hospital. Until a little while ago, there was a doctor that is a healing ability user.....”

“.....Ah, no wonder the wound in my chest is already healed.”

In fact, the power of a healing ability user that Ayato witnessed for the first time should have been something to be impressed about.

But, prana’s consumption seemed intense accordingly and he could agree that unless it was a life-threatening injury, one could not receive its blessing.

Because of that, even though Ayato should have suffered considerable injuries, he was given only normal treatment. Although, Director Jan Korbel expressly showed up and made the treatment personally, so he should be thankful.

“As expected, the healing ability users of a hospital are excellent after all..... to the point of being hateful.”

Ayato did not fail to hear these words that she added in a low voice at the end.

“—Claudia, could you explain it to me?”

When Ayato said so with a serious expression, Claudia cast down her eyes diverting her gaze and kept silent.

A long silence.

Even so, as Ayato was patiently waiting, Claudia eventually spoke.

“.....What do you want to hear?”

“Just about everything.”

Ayato gave an immediate reply without hesitation.

“.....Haa.”

After heaving a somewhat indifferent sigh as she gave up, Claudia slowly raised her body and looked at Ayato.

“I got it. You certainly have the right to hear it, I guess. But, you have already realized it, right? —That dying today at that place was my true wish.”

Deep dejection blurred on Claudia’s voice.

With that alone, he was made to understand, whether he wanted it or not, that Claudia’s words were serious.

As Claudia said, Ayato had vaguely realized it; but as expected, it was a shocking thing to hear her say it to him.

“.....Why would you do such a thing?”

But, he asked as he managed to squeeze only these words.

“Fufufu, well. You will definitely not understand why even if I explain. No, it’s not only you. I think that anyone on this earth other than me will never understand.”

Claudia, who lonelily laughed, slowly closed her eyes as she said so.

“I obtained <Pan-Dora> when I was child and while I was tormented by nightmares of death every night, I gradually lost the value of living. People die no matter how they struggle. No matter how much happiness one experienced while they were alive, there’s no change to the fact that it would eventually come to naught. I actually experienced it not with words or thoughts, but with my body, and when it repeated — I came to think that rather than how to live, how to die was much more important.”

“.....”

Though there was something he wanted to say, Ayato remained silent instead.

At least, the root of that way of thinking was something that only the one, who experienced <Pan-Dora>'s nightmares, could understand.

“And then at one time, I..... I met you, Ayato. Inside a dream that <Pan-Dora> showed me.”

“Me?”

It looked like Laetitia's guess was right on the mark.

When Claudia opened her eyes then, she sadly continued while being bashful.

“My hero, who rushed to my danger, fought in order to protect me and who saved me..... Fufufu, well in the end, I ended up dying even in that dream though.”

Claudia stared at Ayato with moist eyes.

“Since the time when I had that dream, I have longed for you the whole time — and fell in love with you.”

“Claudia.....”

Ayato did not know how to reply to her confession.

Instead, he urged her to go on as he continued questioning her.

“.....That place today was it?”

“Yes, that's right. While it rains incessantly, in the harbor of Seidoukan Academy, I am struck by a blade when protecting you and then die in your

arms — this is the conclusion of the dream I saw then. At that time, my wish, the dream that should come true and the scene that I should arrive at were decided.”

“.....”

Ayato just listened to Claudia’s words silently.

“Thereafter, I have also experienced death more than a thousand times, but there was nothing that exceeded that dream until this day. No, rather the more I experienced new deaths, the stronger and deeper that thought[1] became. So to be frank, I have already understood it, too.”

As Claudia said up to there, she laughed self-derisively.

“—That all of this was orchestrated by <Pan-Dora>.”

“Eh.....?”

“Do you remember when I told you before that this child has a bad personality? This child, by showing me a vivid and ideal death..... by making me fall in love with you, it enjoyed itself by playing with my life.”

“No way.....”

Ayato could not help being at a loss for words.

“Shall I cite you one example? Inside my dreams, I have been killed many times by many people, and by close people to me at that. My mother and father go without saying, but there were also Laetitia, Julis, Sasamiya-san, Toudou-san and Yabuki-kun..... But Ayato, I have never been killed by only you even once. Don’t you think that it’s quite unnatural?”

“But if you understood it, then why.....”

“Fufufu..... Isn’t that obvious? The thing called love — just because you are

aware of it, is not something that can be stopped, you know?"

When Claudia said so and smiled, tears spilled over her eyes.

"My wish was to make the dream I saw that day become reality; nothing more. I put all my effort into that. The fact that I enrolled in Seidoukan Academy, the fact that I became the student council president, the fact that I invited you as a special transfer student, the fact that I participated in the <Gryps>, the fact that I stirred up the Integrated Enterprise Foundation and induced them to send assassins to me, everything..... all of this was done just for the purpose to cause what happened today."

".....But, that wish didn't come true."

Ayato said so and took out something, which he wrapped in a handkerchief, from his breast pocket.

The silver charm that was split in two — the one that Ayato was entrusted with by Laetitia and gave to Claudia.

"According to Korbel-sensei, it seemed that it'd have been dangerous if the wound was only a few centimeters deeper. Perhaps, this charm might have protected you."

"Fufufu, that's again..... a very cheap drama-like miracle, eh."

After Claudia laughed as she sneered at it, she took a very deep breath.

"Actually..... I somehow had a bad feeling. Because in the dream I had, there was no scene where you gave me that charm."

I see. That was probably why Claudia made a perplexed face at that time.

".....That's all. Go on, Ayato. You may scold me to your heart's content. I am ready for that."

“Scold you?”

“I mean, you know? I..... For such a worthless, foolish, selfish and hopeless dream, I have deceived and used you and everybody. I must receive a retribution for that.”

Claudia’s voice seemed to tremble slightly as she spoke.

“.....”

Ayato stood up silently, went to the window and opened the curtain.

Before they noticed, the rain has stopped completely and the moon brightly illuminated the townscape.

“Let’s see..... Certainly, there’s some part where I can’t suppress my anger. No matter how dear a wish it was for you, Claudia, as expected I want you to live after all.”

While looking up at the moon, Ayato continued.

“Not just me, I’m sure that the others also think the same. Especially Julis, she’ll definitely be bright red in anger.”

“.....Yes.”

There, Ayato turned his face and fixedly stared at Claudia.

“But — more importantly, there’s something I want to ask you before all that.”

“Something you want to ask me?”

“Yeah, what is it that you want to do after this?”

“Eh.....? A-After, is it?”

Seeming as if it was a completely unexpected question, Claudia’s eyes

wavered as she was flustered. Because this was the first time that he had seen Claudia like that, he loosened his lips as he found it somewhat funny.

“That’s right. Fortunately..... wait, I’ll say this just in case, but it’s after considering that your dream this time has been splendidly broken.”[2]

“.....You show no mercy, I see.”

“Well, even I’m angry after all. But let’s set that aside for the time being; I want you to tell me what you wish for or what you want to do after this, something along those lines.”

“Even if you asked that..... why are you asking me that?”

Claudia looked like she could not hide how perplexed she was.

“Of course, it’s because I want to know more about you so that you don’t ever again do such a thing from now on.”

When he said so, Claudia opened her mouth with a dumbfounded face.

“Don’t tell me..... are you forgiving me, Ayato?”

Claudia muttered with a face saying that he could not believe it.

“No, I haven’t forgiven you yet. As expected, I want to complain properly. But, that and this are two different things. First — I want to have a talk with you from here on.”

“From here on.....”

Claudia repeated these words in blank amazement.

And then, she smiled wryly with a face seeming like she would burst into tears at any moment.

“Such a thing..... I don’t know..... there’s no way that I would know, is there.....?! I mean, I have lived all along for the sake of this day, only for

that.....! Asking me at this late hour what I'll do after that is.....!"

"Then, you should just find it from now, right?"

Ayato frankly said so.

"I-Is it that simple to....."

"You don't really have to find it right now, Claudia. The thing known as a dream or a wish, you see, is something on the extension of everyday you are living like this. That's why, as long as you don't stop walking, you'll find it someday — at least, I think so."

"I have to keep walking, is it.....?"

"Yes, but if it's a wish like this time again, I'll absolutely stop you."

When Ayato jokingly, yet half-seriously said so, Claudia burst into laughter a little as she could no longer hold it.

"Fufufu.....! You're saying something quite selfish."

".....I think we're alike in this regard though."

Though Claudia's shoulders shook for a while (as she was laughing), she wiped the tears around her eyes with her flexible fingers before long and raised her face.

"I got it. In that case, I, too — I shall begin to walk once again."

Claudia said with a somewhat refreshed face.

Hearing that answer, Ayato felt like he was finally able to lower the curtains for this matter.

".....Thank you, Claudia."

Saying so, he grasped Claudia's hand.

“Fufufu, why are you the one saying thanks? Like that, it’s as if our roles are reversed.....”

However, as Claudia said up to there, she suddenly stiffened.

“.....Claudia?”

Her gaze was focused on her hand held by Ayato.

“N-No, Um, it’s nothing.....!”

When Claudia pulled out her hand in a panic state, she turned away and fell onto the bed.

“Errr..... I-I’m sorry.”

While being surprised at her reaction, although he tried apologizing for the time being, the usual Claudia should have started a skin ship that could not be compared to this every time.

However, Claudia, while being red until the ears, turned only her gaze towards Ayato bashfully.

At such a figure of Claudia that he has never seen so far, Ayato’s heart skipped heavily.

“U-Um..... Ayato?”

“Eh? W-What is it.....?”

“Earlier I think that I..... kind of c-confessed to you, but.....”

“Y-Yea”

Now that she mentioned it, that was right.

“P-Please forget about such a confusion I uttered mixed in the confusion.”

“Eh.....?”

“Someday..... next time, I would like to convey my feelings properly..... after all.”

As Claudia said so, she buried her face in the pillow.

“.....I-I got it.”

Ayato could not give any reply other than that.

“.....”

“.....”



Both of them sank into silence as is, and as they both lost track of time — a knocking sound suddenly resounded in the hospital room.

『——Ayato, Claudia, we'll come in.』

At the same time as a space window opened, Julis's face was projected.

Saya and Kirin also seemed to be there behind her.

“Now then, you'll also have to explain to them. And when it's over..... you'd better be ready; we'll scold you together.”

“Yes, I know. But.....”

Ayato smiled at Claudia, who still made a slightly uneasy face.

“It'll be alright. I think that they'll probably say the same thing as me. I can bet on it.”

When Ayato said so, Claudia finally nodded with her usual smile — yet slightly different from the one so far.

“—Yes”

*

“Phew.....”

Claudia, alone in the hospital room where the moonlight came in, sighed.

In the end, she received a severe scolding from Julis and company for one whole hour.

Saya indifferently and coolly, and Kirin surprisingly with tender care while having tears on her eyes, blamed Claudia's selfishness and betrayal; and they were also happy that she survived. Above all, although in a strong tone,

consideration for Claudia could be felt in some points from the scolding of Julis who got angry like raging fire as soon as she heard the circumstances.

“.....This is the first time in my life that I have been scolded so much by someone.”

Even so, all of them naturally accepted Claudia, so she was thankful for that.

“From now on, huh.....”

She refuted the words that Ayato said.

A frighteningly huge blank future spread now before Claudia’s eyes.

How ironic even though she was the wielder of <Pan-Dora> that had the ability of future foresight.

“Well at any rate, I have to settle things with those guys first.”

As Claudia muttered so, she operated the portable terminal put at her bedside. How many years had it been since she herself took the initiative to call this person?

A little while after the call, her mother’s — Isabella’s face was projected on the space window.

『To think that I’d receive a call from, strange things do happen after all.』

A perfect smile and a gentle tone as usual.

『I shall listen to what you have to say.』

“Before that, I would like to express my thanks.”

『.....About what?』

Isabella tilted her head to the side as she was baffled.

“It looks like I too will be able to change a little thanks to this incident.”

Perhaps because she took it as sarcasm, Isabella’s eyes softly narrowed.

『……It looks like you skillfully came through this time, but there’ll be no next time.』

“Yes, I know. That’s why..... I surrender already.”

『……Surrender?』

To Isabella’s quizzical voice, Claudia’s shoulders shook as she was chuckling.

“It is neither a trap nor a stratagem. I am saying that it is my loss.”

『What are you up to at this late hour? You are not possibly valuing your life this late in the game, are you?』

“No, you are right..... I value my life. Even I am surprised about it.”

『……』

Over the space window, she keenly felt Isabella’s gaze sounding her out.

Well, it was no wonder. The other party, who was so obstinate, had easily raised a white flag; so it would be natural to be suspicious. Moreover, strategically aside, tactically it was an opponent whom she might say to have more or less won against.

『Assuming that I believe it, do you think that Galaxy will sheathe its sword. Since the situation has deteriorated to this extent, we will not stop so easily. And you are the one who created that situation, you know?』

“Yes, I understand that as well. The negotiations are from here on.”

While saying so, Claudia operated her portable terminal.

『There is no longer room for negotiations.....』

The mouth of Isabella, who started to say that, suddenly stopped.

“I sent you some data a moment ago. Please, check them.”

『This is.....』

Isabella opened her eyes wide as she was surprised.

“Do you think that the knowledge that I got as a byproduct of <Pan-Dora>’s price was only regarding <Varda Vaos>? That is some confidential information about Queen Veil and Le Wolfe. Well, please think of it as a present.”

『……This is, a present, huh.』

Isabella’s eyes shone in a calculating way.

Well, of course. There was no way that a top executive of an Integrated Enterprise Foundation could ignore circumstances that would bring a clear profit to their own camp.

“From now on, I will offer information like this to Galaxy. How about it, do you think that there is enough value in reaching a common ground?”

『……I understand. I will first thoroughly investigate this information. Until then, you will keep your life for the time being.』

After pondering for a while, Isabella said cautiously.

“Thank you. Also..... Mother”

『……What is it?』

“Sorry for the abrupt question, but why did you enter Galaxy?”

Because Claudia's father, Nicholas, was originally a person of the Enfield House that became the foothold of the actual place in the power struggle at the time of the Europe revival, she understood why he was in Galaxy. However, Isabella was an ordinary person you would find anywhere and should have nothing to do with them.

『What will you do after hearing it?』

Isabella seemed taken aback at Claudia's abrupt question.

"No, I just thought that it might be interesting if I were to one day enter Galaxy and then..... someday, stab you in the back."

Claudia said so and grinned.

That was just an idea she hit upon. Since Claudia was a <Genestella>, she could not become a top executive like Isabella, and to begin with, Claudia did not think even as a joke of undergoing a mind adjustment program.

However — leaving such minor details aside, she thought that it would be interesting if there was such a choice.

『.....Fufufu, fufufufu! What on earth happened to you, Claudia? You said something quite interesting again.』

Then, Isabella answered with a really happy face that Claudia has never seen so far.

『I understand. If by chance you were able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with me..... I would tell you about it then.』

After Isabella said so, the space window turned black.

When Claudia collapsed on the bed after a short while, she broadly grinned.

"I see; it is quite pleasant that she thinks that there is a possibility....."

She muttered so to herself and then closed her eyes contentedly for a while.
This feeling of elation was not bad.

“.....Now then.”

After a short time, Claudia opened her eyes, raised her body and operated her portable terminal again.

This was because there was another person whom she had to thank and complain to no matter what.

“—How do you do, Laetitia? Can I have a little of your time?”

Translator and references notes

[1] thought that there was no dream surpassing the above-mentioned one

[2] well, I guess here he means that he didn't want her to say something like 'ideal death' again

Epilogue

Eishiro, not doing anything in particular, was just gazing at the moon after the rain from a treetop.

How much time has he spent sitting like that?

Eishiro suddenly heaved a heavily deep sigh.

“Oh boy, I’ve done it.....”

As expected, he went too far this time in various ways.

It was not like he regretted it, but he didn’t think that it’d end with just a scolding this time. After all, he had clearly backstabbed Bujinsai.

No, accurately speaking, he sneakily stabbed at him; but there was no way that Bujinsai has not noticed.

“I might as well seriously become a nukenin[1], I guess.....”

Although in that case, it was regrettable that he would have to leave this academy.

Even if one searched around the whole world, you would only find one crazy city like this, and he would not also get tired to watching Ayato, Julis, Claudia and company..... And well, his club president.

“Now then, what to do now?”

When Eishiro, whose motto was to always live leisurely, was unusually racking his brains seriously, he received a call on his portable terminal.

“Geh.....”

Though he leaked out such a voice as soon as he checked the one calling, he couldn't afford not to pick it up.

When he opened a space window, Bujinsai's sullen face was projected there.

"Greeting, Father. The failure of the mission this time is truly regrettable."

Eishiro was quite impressed at himself, who could talk so frivolously even in such a situation.

『Shut up, stupid son; do you know how much the clan's name has been stained because of you?』

Though Bujinsai's tone was openly displeased, on the other hand, he looked healthy enough that you wouldn't be able to tell that he had previously been beating into the ground by Ayato.

"Dear me, what are you talking about? I really have no clue....."

Just in case, Eishiro tried feigning ignorance.

『Well, there's a lot of things, but..... what pissed me the most is the fact that you gave Eika and company's whereabouts to that World Dragon's brat.』

But, it seemed like he was completely found out.

Eishiro sent to Arema the data of the siege formation that Bujinsai lay out, and moreover, even informed her of the whereabouts of Eika and the other healing ability users.

"Just going against me is still better, but to think that you'd go as far as to sell your big sisters who have been affectionate to you..... I'm so ashamed that I've no words to say."

"But, they weren't injured that seriously, right?"

At that point in time, Arema was already injured quite severely. No matter how low his sisters' battle ability was as healing ability users, the most that Arema could do, would be to stun them with a surprise attack.

『Even so, it's not something that can be forgiven. According to the home's rules, I want to sever that head of yours even right now, but.....』

Saying up to there, Bujinsai made a sour face as if having swallowed a bitter bug.

『Unfortunately, the masters[2] seemed to highly value your work.』

“Come again.....?”

It was a story like a bolt from the blue.

“The big shots of Galaxy think that of me?”

『Thus, we can't lay a hand on you. But, don't ever think to come back home again.』

Since he did not have such intention in the least from the beginning, there was no problem.

“Got it, Father. I'll bear it in mind.”

『……Hmph!』

Bujinsai glared at Eishiro until the end, but his severe face vanished along with the space window.

Still, what was strange was that Galaxy's treatment towards Eishiro.

Far from punishing a pawn that utterly hindered the orders they themselves handed down, they even valued him highly.

While folding his arms, Eishiro pondered on the fact that he has narrowly

escaped from disposal.

But, even when spending some time thinking about it, he could not find a reason he could consent with.

However, if there was a reason he could not consent with, he happened to know only one.

“.....No, it can’t be, right?”

There could not be such a thing as a top executive of Galaxy concerned about her daughter’s safety. In the first place, it contradicted in every aspect.
[3]

“Well, whatever. I shall soon go back to my room, I guess.”

As Eishiro threw such a thought in the trash box of his thoughts, he disappeared from the treetop.

*

“.....Yes, yes, you do not need to remind me that! You, too, do your utmost to win and advance to the final!”

Such a voice could be overheard from the other side of a half-opened door.

Laetitia, who opened that door and came back to the office before long, had a somewhat satisfied face.

To the point of even lightly humming to herself.

“You look quite happy, Laetitia. Has anything good happened?”

When Ernest asked so, Laetitia’s face became bright red like an apple and she quickly shook her head.

“N-Nothing in particular! I-It’s really nothing!”

“.....I see. Well anyway, the matter of Miss Enfield seemed to have been settled well. The Sinodomias have also confirmed that the Yabuki Clan left Rikka.”

Ernest lightly smiled and joined his fingers together.

“I-Is that so? That’s certainly good to hear.”

“Miss Enfield’s injuries don’t seem that serious, right?”

“Yes, she says that she received treatment from a healing ability user, so there’s no need to worry on that side..... Ah!”

To Laetitia who was easily tricked, Ernest continued while suppressing his laughter.

“There’s really no need to hide the fact that you got in contact with her. It’s not like you talked about anything bad, is it?”

Even Laetitia was not that stupid. She should greatly be aware that the normal line’s use had the danger of leaking out to the Sinodomias, so she would not do something like being caught by the tail.

“T-That’s right, but.....”

As she only moved her mouth mumblingly, Laetitia’s words were incomprehensible.

It looked she was only embarrassed.

“Oh, also — tomorrow, or rather, it’s already today, huh. Anyway, it looks like we won our semifinal by default.”

“Oh my..... As I thought.”

“It couldn’t be helped considering the situation. I think that it was a decision of last resort even for the Steering Committee..... Now then, fortunately we

will go to the final in perfect condition, but I wonder how it will be for them.”

“.....”

To Ernest’s words, Laetitia kept silent with a serious expression.

Although they successfully got over this incident, Team Enfield’s next opponent was an extremely powerful one.

“There is a great possibility that Team Yellow Dragon will be the one confronting us to the final. No, rather, looking purely at the probabilities of either side winning, theirs might be higher.”

World Dragon Seventh Institute’s Team Yellow Dragon was a team that might be said to be Team Lancelot’s exact opposite. Although it was a powerful team gathered with the overwhelming individual strength of Woo Xiao Fay aka <Hagun Star> as the core, from Ernest’s viewpoint, it was quite lacking in charm after all. And for some reason, that Xiao Fay just couldn’t peak his interest.

“Preferably, I rather want them (Team Enfield) to win and face us.”

Then, Laetitia said in a strong tone.

“It will be all right. They will definitely win!”

“Laetitia.....”

Ernest, though slightly surprised, greatly nodded.

“Yes, you’re right. I shall wait for a fun final.”

At any rate, the result should already be given tomorrow about this time.

Ernest put strength into his linked fingers so as to suppress the flame which burned in his heart.

*

—World Dragon Seventh Institute, audience room.

“Yup, yup, you’ve done well. It’s a splendid result, Arema.”

The cheerful XingLu shook her feet on the chair as she said so.[4]

“With this, it looks like tomorrow’s match will be fun.”

『……As for me, it’s not really a result I can be very proud of though.』

Arema, whose body was covered all over with bandage, said so and grieved at her own pitifulness.

Although she was able to achieve her goal, she has been completely defeated by Bujinsai. What’s more, she was in this state.

“Now, now, isn’t fine? I told you that that guy’s void tide technique is troublesome, right? Even among my disciples, only Xiao Fay and Fuyuka are the only ones, who look like they can do something about it.”

『Even though that young lady Fuyuka is a guest, is it fine to include her as one of your disciples?』

“She’s saying so herself, so I don’t mind it.”

XingLu said so and cacklingly laughed

Arema, who was looking at such XingLu with an amazed face, suddenly remembered Bujinsai’s words.

『That reminds me, I happened to hear something.』

“Hmm?”

『Is it true that the current you don’t possess even half of the power you had

a long time ago?』

Then, XingLu who heard it broadly grinned.

“Hou, so the Yabuki’s head said something like that.”

『Well as for me, I’m half in doubt about it, though.』

Of course, there was no doubt that it would be interesting if it was true.

But, as someone, who know a fragment of XingLu’s strength, there was also the feeling that she could not completely believe it.

“Let’s see, if I have to say, I’d say that it’s half true.”

『Half?』

“Restricted only to martial arts (as in Taijutsu), it’s certainly true. Assuming that I was at 100% in my golden age, I’d say I’m at 30% to 40% at best with this current body. But when it comes to techniques (as in Jutsu such Senjutsu, etc), then it’s a different story. After all, now I’m overflowing with mana, and both the power and accuracy can’t be compared with the ones at the time.”

『……I see』

Though Arema could consent, at the same time she keenly realized again how frightening the little girl before her eyes was.

This was because when XingLu spared with Arema, she has never used those techniques even once.

『Great, I’m getting excited.....!』

And, she could not help feeling excited at that.

“Hohoho, I see you never change.”

Seeing such Arema, XingLu nodded contentedly, but she suddenly clapped her hands before long.

“That’s right; shall I teach you something good as a reward?”

『Hou, what is it, what is it?』

“It’s a plan that I’m secretly working out currently for the <Lindvolus>. If things go well, I don’t mind making you join, too.”

As XingLu beckoned her, Arema approached her face.

“Actually.....”

『Hmm, hmm.....』

Arema who heard it could not stop her face becoming unintentionally loose.

『I like it! That seems quite interesting!』

“I know right? I’ve already chosen several people at my own discretion. Well, they’ll actually begin to move about when the New Year starts though.”

『Kakaka! I’m looking forward to it!』

Arema said so and struck her fist on her other hand’s palm.

“Ah, I’ll tell you just in case, but make sure to keep it secret from HuFeng. If he were to know it, he’d absolutely stop me after all.”

『I know!』

—And then.

“Master, I would like to consult a little..... Is something wrong?”

HuFeng, who entered the audience room, looked at XingLu and Arema with a puzzled face.

“No, no, don’t mind it. So..... what do you want to consult me about?”

At XingLu’s words, HuFeng said while taking a stance of Bao Qan.

“With all due respect — I would like you to allow me the use of that ogre lux for tomorrow’s semifinal.”

Translator and references notes

[1] meaning runaway shinobi

[2] speaking here of Galaxy, I guess

[3] looks like here, we catch a glimpse of Isabella still slightly concerned about her daughter despite having undergone a mind adjustment program; which would normally be impossible

[4] shook her feet because they don’t touch the ground when she is sitting on the chair as she is small